

Stoner by John Williams

Critical Paper

A summary of the book, *Stoner*, could be completed in a few lines. The novel is about a university professor who lives a life with significant disappointments, but maintains his love of literature and teaching, and his belief in the value of the university as an honorable and virtuous institution. These themes are evident. A less overt, but still important, theme relates to the purpose of education and, more specifically, the necessity of the right kind of education. This is a timely question, when so many families are burdened by escalating college tuition, and when conflicts over public school curricula seem to question the very purpose of education and magnify its influence on our culture. Our county has always valued public education as a program to equip our citizens to make decisions in a free, democratic society. We understand that access to education, and the content of that education, carries great importance in our lives. Stoner, his wife Edith, and daughter Grace, are each shaped by their education and their experiences related to it. Each of their lives is profoundly affected, positively and negatively, by their access to education, the circumstances and context in which they receive it and the nature of the education they receive.

We are introduced to Stoner's childhood home and his parents at the beginning of the book. Stoner's parents are farmers who can be described, if one is being charitable, as simple people. Williams also describes each of them as one would a beast of burden. After Stoner's mother dies, following his father who had died shortly before, Stoner looks out at his parents' fields and thinks, "Their lives had been expended in cheerless labor, their wills broken, their intelligences numbed." When Stoner's father tells him to go to college, Williams describes him having a rare moment of personal reflection: "'I never had no schooling to speak of, Sometimes when I'm working the field I get to thinking....I get to thinking-.' He scowled at his hands and shook his head. 'You go on to the University come fall...'" Stoner realizes that this speech was the longest his father had ever given, and yet, his father cannot articulate what it is he thinks. Williams seems to suggest that mind-numbing labor and the

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absence of meaningful education renders one incapable of abstract thought, or at the very least, of introspection. Lacking the need for deep thought or reflection, Stoner's parents are left not only with a paucity of knowledge, but an incapability of understanding the world beyond them.

After Stoner spends a year at university, he recognizes that he, like his parents, has been moving through his life without any thought or examination. Williams writes, "He became conscious of himself in a way that he had not done before.... Sometimes he thought of himself as he had been a few years before and was astonished by the memory of that strange figure, brown and passive as the earth from which it had emerged." Meaningful education facilitated Stoner's transformation. He had attended primary school through high school, and he had completed a year of Agricultural courses, but it was not until his second year, in an introductory literature class, that professor Archer Sloane introduced Stoner to a higher level of thought. Experiencing an epiphany, Stoner is awakened to the life of the mind. "It was not until he returned after his second year that William Stoner learned why he had come to college.... And he pondered the words that Archer Sloane spoke in class, as if beneath their flat, dry meaning he might discover a clue that would lead him where he was intended to go.."

The Shakespeare sonnet that Professor Sloane challenged Stoner to explain was Sonnet 73. Stoner at first had no idea what the poem meant. Williams most likely chose this sonnet because of its reflection on youth lost, middle age and approaching death. Sloane is a kind of prophet who inspires his students to take advantage of their youth and pursue their true loves. Sloane later becomes a tragic figure when the brutality and vulgarity of modern life -- exemplified by the jingoism and barbarism of World War I -- assault the academic institution that is the object of his love. Stoner's true love is not Edith or his daughter Grace, but literature and learning, which he pursues for the rest of his life.

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Education then is a positive force when it moves one's mind to a deeper understanding of the self. Simply sitting in a classroom and passively receiving information does not have the same transformative effect. As Stoner grows as a teacher, he develops the ability to communicate to his students his own love for literature. "The love of literature, of language, of the mystery of the mind and heart showing themselves in the minute, strange, and unexpected combinations of letters and words, in the blackest and coldest print- the love which he had hidden as if it were illicit and dangerous, he began to display, tentatively at first, and then boldly, and then proudly." This is when Stoner feels he has become the teacher he wants to be. He understands his own love of literature and is finally able to communicate that to his students, which enlivens concepts that, without this spark, would be inaccessible to them. Stoner's students respond to his methods. Students participate more in class, stay after to continue discussions and begin to display original thought in their papers.

Despite a loveless marriage, an unhappy and unsuccessful daughter, and a career without accolades, Sloaner looks back at his life as well-lived because of his continued pursuit of learning and his ability to share this learning. When Stoner is on his deathbed, his fingers move across the book he had written and he comes to this realization. "A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been." Although his book had fallen into obscurity, its existence was meaningful to Stoner because it was evidence of his transformation from an unthinking beast of burden to an enlightened man.

Stoner's wife Edith never experiences a similar transformation or sense of enlightenment. Edith is not only the antithesis of Stoner, she is his nemesis through much of the book. She makes it her mission to destroy what and who he values and loves. As a reader, you can't help but ask, how did she become such a horrible person? While Stoner was falling in love with words and establishing his place in an environment

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where ideas and thought give life meaning, Edith was being taught to assume a formal and secondary role in someone else's life. Williams writes, "She was educated on the premise that she would be protected from the gross events that life might thrust in her way, and upon the premise that she had no other duty than to be a graceful and accomplished accessory to that protection...Her moral training, both at the schools she attended and at home, was negative in nature, prohibitive in intent and almost entirely sexual....So she grew up with a frail talent in the more genteel arts, and no knowledge of the necessity of living from day to day." This passage highlights two circumstances that served to shape Edith. Edith was not equipped to deal with life's problems, and Stoner was not able to protect her from them. She had developed a cramped worldview and did not have the tools to escape her own limitations. Stoner did not understand what made life difficult for Edith, and he could not help her to change, or perhaps chose not to. When Stoner is near death he looks at Edith and thinks, "If I had been stronger, he thought; if I had known more; if I had loved her more."

Steve Almond, in his book *William Stoner and the Battle for the Inner Life*, suggests that Williams created a backstory for Edith that involved childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Edith's strong dislike of sex, and her often hateful behavior toward her husband and child, might have been the result of this abuse. When Edith goes home for her father's funeral, her behavior belies darker forces than just grief over losing a family member. Edith gathers all of the items that had any connection to her father and lays on her childhood bedroom floor. She is described as "fondling" them then burning what she can and pounding the other items into a fine dust and flushing them down the toilet. Almond writes, "It doesn't take a psychoanalyst to infer what Williams is getting at with all this, that Edith's father sexually abused her in some manner, and that this unprocessed trauma triggers the fanatical antagonism we see her exhibit toward her husband and daughter. She embodies an odd inversion of the standard patriarchal formula: female rage erases female trauma."

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The expectation that Edith would serve as “a graceful and accomplished accessory” was not possible for her -- it was not what she was cut out for, and her failure to master that role has severe results for her and her family. Edith is described as shy, and her behavior as she is being courted by Stoner, and then later as a young wife attempting to entertain, points to a severe social anxiety. Edith’s panic attack when preparing to entertain and her subsequent period of incapacity -- she is bedridden after these events -- points to Edith’s fundamental incompatibility with the traditional role as a professor’s wife.

Edith’s education, such as it was, gave her no ability to find enlightenment or even understand what might satisfy her. She maniacally throws herself into pottery, acting in plays, and organizing activities for Grace, only to abandon these pursuits and fall into further depression. Her only means to create a sense of self-efficacy is through the care of others, which she can’t effectively do because of her own limitations. Edith has no sense of her own needs for intimacy and for love. Her education, instead of expanding the self, truncated and spoiled her. Not every education is enlightening; some types serve to destroy.

Grace, Stoner and Edith’s daughter, also has an education that eventually leads to self-destruction. Stoner provided Grace’s care when she was a baby and young child. Those years could have been foundational for Grace, but when Edith decides she will be the only force in Grace’s life, Stoner is shunted aside. Stoner accepts this despite knowing how destructive it will be for Grace. “She was, he knew, ...one of those rare and always lovely humans whose morale was so delicate that it must be nourished and cared for that it might be fulfilled. Alien to the world, it could not live where it could not be at home, avid for tenderness and quiet, it had to feed upon indifference and callousness and noise.”

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Edith's form of education for Grace is to make her pretty and popular. Edith's goal is to make Grace into the person that Edith could not become. Grace's popularity with her classmates does grow, but only because she is unruly and promiscuous. This behavior leads her to a pregnancy, marriage, widowhood, and to her abandonment of any further studies. With no options for self-fulfillment, "...she would live out her days quietly, drinking a little more, year by year, numbing herself against the nothingness her life had become."

One could fault Williams for the weakness and incompetence of his principal female characters. But although Edith and Grace could not find satisfaction and meaning in their lives, their unhappiness is not due to any inherent feminine flaws (indeed, Stoner's lover Catherine is depicted as a talented and loving person), but instead to the inappropriate and limited education that each received. Both women were raised to be who they never could be; dissatisfaction was guaranteed for them.

Stoner can be seen as a sad figure: unhappy marriage, miserable daughter, estrangement from his grandson, a career that, due to conflict with his department's head, prevents him from achieving a place of prestige. Stoner, however, lives an authentic life. Describing Stoner, Williams stated in an interview "I think he's a real hero. A lot of people who have read the novel think that Stoner had such a sad and bad life. I think he had a very good life. He had a better life than most people do, certainly. He was doing what he wanted to do, he had some feeling for what he was doing, he had some sense of the importance of the job he was doing ... The important thing in the novel to me is Stoner's sense of a job ... a job in the good and honourable sense of the word. His job gave him a particular kind of identity and made him what he was."

Despite all of the negatives in Stoner's life, he found a calling that was his true love and that gave him fulfillment. Edith and Grace, however, were corrupted and stunted in their emotional and intellectual development, having been taught and

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internalizing all of the wrong lessons. Although Stoner seems not to have gained much in life, it is Edith and Grace who are the true failures, never having received an education with the potential to enlighten them and never overcoming those unfortunate circumstances.

QUESTIONS

In a prescient scene toward the beginning of the novel, Stoner is drinking beer with his two young graduate student friends, Gordon Finch and David Masters. Usually a cynic, Masters in this setting extols the university and states that it exists “for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear.” He further states: “We do no harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it; and that's a triumph of natural virtue, or pretty damn close to it.”

Do you think Williams shared Masters' view of the university as a haven for the dispossessed and a “triumph of natural virtue”? If so, how do you reconcile the treatment of Stoner by Lomax and the ostracism of Katherine Driscoll by the university community?

There are many examples throughout the book in which Stoner shows great strength of character, such as his refusal to back down when his Department Chair insists on promoting an unqualified graduate student, but there are other circumstances where it could be argued that he shows weakness, such as in failing to confront the problems in his marriage, not volunteering for military service and having an extramarital affair. How do you judge Stoner's overall character, and how do you think our views of his behavior might be different today than they would have been during the time of the novel, or at the time the novel was published (1966)?

Williams stated to an interviewer that he considered Stoner a “real hero” who had a “very good life.” Do you think Stoner was successful? If so, what do you think of the passages at the very beginning of the book, which describe him as a little-remembered professor with no accomplishments to speak of?

William Stoner certainly had many admirable qualities, but to what extent do you think he bears some moral responsibility for some of the failures in his life, in particular his difficult relationship with his wife Edith and his separation from his daughter Grace? Do you think Stoner could have taken actions to improve those circumstances?