6-2023

# Historical Realism and Stoic Heroes in the Work of John Williams

Cameron Sepede

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates how John Williams's three major works of fiction — *Butcher's Crossing, Stoner*, and *Augustus* — are narratively structured around three main characters who embody the tenets of stoic and Emersonian transcendental philosophy, respectively. Williams uses these characters to promote and critique preconceived notions of heroic masculinity as structured within these philosophies. Through an analysis of form, this thesis will explore how Williams scaffolds his three main characters around the language and ideas present within each philosophical school. Williams's portrayal of heroic masculinity, as seen through a feminist perspective, questions the ideal masculine hero, which will be discussed herein. The current critical work surrounding Williams's fiction fails to point out and discuss just how Williams constructs his heroes around philosophical frameworks because the focus is too often placed on the narrative and not the characters themselves. Through this analysis and critique of heroic masculinity in the works of John Williams, we can glean insights into broader questions of heroism as it is embodied in character and how that heroism is often embedded in constructed tropes of masculinity.



## Document Type

Masters Thesis

## Degree Name

M.A.

## First Advisor

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## Second Advisor

Eric Gould

## Third Advisor

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## Keywords

Augustus, Butcher's Crossing, Historical realism, John Williams, Stoicism, Stoner

## Subject Categories

Arts and Humanities | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, North America | Other Philosophy | Philosophy

# Historical Realism and Stoic Heroes in the Work of John Williams

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

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June 2023

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Title: Historical Realism and Stoic Heroes in the Work of John Williams
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Degree Date: June 2023

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This thesis investigates how John Williams's three major works of fiction — *Butcher's Crossing*, *Stoner*, and *Augustus* — are narratively structured around three main characters who embody the tenets of stoic and Emersonian transcendental philosophy, respectively. Williams uses these characters to promote and critique preconceived notions of heroic masculinity as structured within these philosophies. Through an analysis of form, this thesis will explore how Williams scaffolds his three main characters around the language and ideas present within each philosophical school. Williams's portrayal of heroic masculinity, as seen through a feminist perspective, questions the ideal masculine hero, which will be discussed herein. The current critical work surrounding Williams's fiction fails to point out and discuss just how Williams constructs his heroes around philosophical frameworks because the focus is too often placed on the narrative and not the characters themselves. Through this analysis and critique of heroic masculinity in the works of John Williams, we can glean insights into broader questions of heroism as it is embodied in character and how that heroism is often embedded in constructed tropes of masculinity.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to sincerely thank Professor W. Scott Howard for agreeing to assist and advise this project after hearing about it at a beginning of the year faculty party. At this point, the ideas for such a project only existed in my head and hadn't been made manifest on the page yet, and still Professor Howard wanted to see it through to the end, which I will be forever grateful for. I would also like to thank Sarah Manita Davis for being such a wonderful roommate who helped with moral support, encouragement, and plenty of coffee. I would also like to thank Halley Roberts and Nica Franklin for the countless and much needed trips to Denver bars for games of pool which helped get my mind off this project and other academic responsibilities. Also, much thanks to Dr. R. D. Perry for some reading advice, overall guidance, and a very helpful research and bibliography class that got this project off the ground. I would also like to thank professors Naomi Reshotko and Eric Gould for reading my work and for agreeing to be on my defense committee; as well as Anne Marie Candido, Alan Prendergast, and Bill Zaranka for meeting with me, talking about this project and the works of John Williams, and most importantly for helping me to articulate and formulate my ideas verbally before diving headfirst into the chaos of the unknown and unwritten paper.

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## Introduction

> Will I not walk in the footsteps of my predecessors? I will indeed use the ancient road — but if I find another route that is more direct and has fewer ups and downs, I will stake out that one. Those who advanced these doctrines before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth lies open to all; it has not yet been taken over. Much is left also for those yet to come.[1]

In order to establish, from a formalist perspective, what John Williams attempts to convey to his readers in his three main literary works — which seem to contribute to the genre of historical realism — we can start by saying that he combines detailed historical research with sincere character development which presents a historical realism that immerses readers in an exploration of philosophical and ethical world views. The three novels, *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), *Stoner* (1965), and *Augustus* (1973) will be studied in chronological order according to the date of publication for each. Williams attempts to embody his three main characters with certain philosophical and moral worldviews that are then pitted against an indifferent and often hostile, yet historically accurate world. This thesis investigates the construction of heroic masculinity as embodied in his three main characters who are, ultimately, the focal point of each narrative. This project, broadly speaking, concerns itself with questions of realism, historicity, and the articulation of the inner experiences of characters.

[1] William O. Stephens, "The Stoics and their Philosophical System," in *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020), 22.

Asquith is one of the few critics, so far, to show how central the philosophies of Stoicism and Emersonian transcendentalism are to Williams's narratives[2]. However, there has yet to be an extended explanation of how Williams specifically constructs his central characters around the tenets of these philosophies, showing how Williams essentially embodies his characters with certain philosophical outlooks. While some of Williams's critics have hinted at this idea when discussing his novels, it has not yet been explicitly stated. This work, in part, aims to enhance Williams scholarship by highlighting the realism found in his characters as well as in the world their author has built for them. One of the intentions of this project, then, will be to provide an extended explanation of Williams's character-building around these philosophies and worldviews. An additional objective of this project will be to examine Williams's characters from a perspective that presents them as the genuine and flawed individuals they seem to be. These characters are authentic because of their profound imperfections, yet their heroism lies in their ability to persist despite their initial setbacks.

This project will analyze the three major works of John Williams through a lens in which Caroline Levine's expansion on the affordances of the term *form*[3] in literary analysis will have relevant influence. This project will discuss how Williams is forming

[2] Mark Asquith, *Lost in the New West: Reading Williams, McCarthy, Proulx, and Mcguane* (New York: Bloosmbury Academic, 2002). In this book, Asquith devotes an entire chapter to Williams's *Bucher's Crossing*. Asquith points out how the narrative structures itself around an Emersonian idealism of self-discovery and self-transcendence within nature. Asquith says that Williams, by writing his western *Butcher's Crossing*, attempts to "do something serious" with the western genre by critiquing Emersonian transcendentalism.

[3] Caroline Levine, *Forms: whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19. Levine asserts that the form of the longer novel "affords elaborate processes of character development." Though Williams's works aren't particularly "long", they do develop character "in multiplot social contexts."

characters, in the same way that a sculptor or ceramicist *forms* a piece; Williams, in the literary sense, forms his characters and their world with language that surrounds itself in the ontic. His characters are empiricists and materialists rather than romantics. The worlds he forms for them are similarly hard and material, often hostile and without mystery. For example, in *Butcher's Crossing*, the main character starts out with romantic Emersonian notions of how nature draws out and restores the forgotten soul of the urban individual. However, this main character finds out as the narrative unfolds that nature itself is soulless and indifferent. Nature, then, almost a character itself within the world of *Butcher's* Crossing, is shown to be hostile to human desire and will.

These affordances for form will apply both to the building of character and the building of the world they inhabit. As explained in *Explorations in Poetics* by Benjamin Harshav, "interdependence between constructs is at the very heart of representation of *reality* and of works of literature" (italics mine).[4] That is, the interdependence that realism in characters depends upon the realism of their inhabited world, and visa-versa, and that the co-employment of these two constructs is the foundation upon which *realism* is built.

The first of these constructs, the analysis of the formation of character, will take a formalist perspective in analyzing the compositional moves Williams is using to build his three main characters in the minds of his readers. The second, will be an analysis of how Williams is building a historically realistic world in which overtly romantic gestures are rejected and the internal concerns of everyday people are foregrounded.

[4] Benjamin Harshav, *Explorations in Poetics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 4.

Also present here will be a discussion of the potential for literature to disseminate a pedagogy of ethics to readers by laying out how Williams builds his three main characters around certain philosophical world views — which, despite the tragedies inherent to life, can ultimately lead to the fulfillment of what might be understood as a kind of virtue. Williams, in an attempt to show his readers just what this path to virtue might look like, does so by embodying his characters with a certain philosophical outlook and ethic towards life that allows his readers to experience the consequences (whether for good or for ill, and often times both) of a certain belief system.

By choosing to discuss these three novels specifically, as opposed to the rest of Williams's body of work, it begs the question: what is to be made of his first composed and published novel *Nothing but the Night*? And what of his unfinished and posthumously recovered novel *The Sleep of Reason*, or his two published books of poetry *The Necessary Lie* and *The Broken Landscape*? Although his poetry shares important and interesting thematic elements to his fiction,[5] this project is primarily concerned with literary character and its relation to realism, which are broader concerns within the field of fiction and cannot be fully fleshed out in the poetic form.

Given that his first novel *Nothing but the Night* is more psychoanalytic in nature in comparison to his three later philosophical works, the content therein will only be discussed briefly in the introduction. Although *Nothing but the Night* shares minor thematic similarities to Williams's later works, it differs in its portrayal of character in

[5] John Williams, *The Necessary Lie*, (Denver, Verb Publications, 1965), 36. Here I am thinking of Williams's interest in the philosophical truths found in fiction which is an idea present in his poem "The Poet" found in his collection of poems *The Necessary Lie*.

one important way: time. Time, also, is one of the ways with which Williams's brand of historical realism develops from one novel to the next. Progressing from the expanse of a day (*Nothing but the Night*) to a year (*Butcher's Crossing*) and then a full lifetime (*Stoner* and *Augustus*) allows Williams develop characters that evolve and reflect the times in which they are changing in. In Williams's three later philosophical works, he uses expansive amounts of narrative time to build his characters and present them in different situations and stages of life. For example, *Butcher's Crossing* deals with, in-detail, a very formative year in the life of Will Andrews, and *Stoner* and *Augustus* both portray the life of their main characters nearly in full. However, the narrative arc of *Nothing but the Night* only captures one day in the life of its main character, Arthur Maxley, with only one flashback to a traumatic moment in his childhood involving a violent encounter between his mother and father. The character of Arthur Maxley in *Nothing but the Night*, is much more superficial in comparison to Will Andrews, William Stoner, and Octavius Caesar.

In consideration of the fact that *The Sleep of Reason* was left unfinished, the broader concerns of the novel cannot be fully assessed and understood in totality. Although from what is accessible of *The Sleep of Reason*, it does seem like Williams was concerned with the life-long psychological scars that war inflicts on its participants. It is telling that violence and war are key components to Williams's development of historical realism in all three of his published novels that this thesis is concerned with. As just previously stated, *Nothing but the Night* reflects on the lasting effects that an encounter with malevolence and domestic violence in childhood has into adulthood. *Butcher's Crossing* is very much concerned with a connection of national character with slaughter and

violence. Given that Williams's time spent writing and publishing *Butcher's Crossing* coincided with American troops landing in Vietnam, and given that he himself was a veteran of the Pacific theatre of WWII, one can't help but notice this broader thematic concern with violence and slaughter as it relates to American nationalism and constructs of heroic masculinity. When one looks to history, one encounters, from frame to frame, one violent bloodbath after another, which is why war and violence is such an interesting uniting throughline present in Williams's works of historical realism. One of Stoner's best-friends, Dave Masters, is killed in France during WWI, and Stoner watch's helplessly as his classes and beloved campus are drained of its young men who are sent both to Europe and The Pacific to enact violence and have violence enacted upon them. War similarly permeates the beginning, middle, and end of the nonchronological narrative present in *Augustus*, as even the most amateur historian would expect from a story concerning the Augustinian period of the Roman Empire.

Williams's novels immerse his readers in their own critical historical moment by providing a specific narrative and viewpoint through which readers can experience what it must have been like to live through these grand moments in history from the perspective of a specific individual. It is worth briefly asserting here that fiction can serve as a valid medium through which historical moments can be observed and experienced. Some of the greatest minds in history have alluded to fiction as textual evidence when offering insights into the individual human mind or human society such as it was during a specific time and place: here I am thinking of William James's use of literary characters as examples when attempting to show his readers how certain "types" of people interact with other people and the world around them. James used a character in Jane Austen's

*Emma* to specify a "mental type" of person. More specifically, a mental type that is acutely attune to free association, which is essentially, as James describes, the pattern-finding mechanism in the brain that links ideas and things together.[6]

Drawing from Carolyn Steedman's understanding of cultural history in *Dust*, which understands individual narrative as that which realistically describes a setting in time and space as being able to cut a window into history as it was in detail. In chapter 5 of *Dust*, Steedman points to the example of George Elliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* by quoting Elliot's biographer who said that *Middlemarch* was "the perfect historical novel." So perfect and "so successful that we scarcely think of it in terms of that sub-genre of fiction."[7] The purpose of novels in relation to history, according to Steedman, lies in the ability to "make the past live for the reader: [the] novel could then affect the integration of the external time of history with the beat of human interiority."[8] Writers (like Williams) who are then interested in bringing the past to life also have an inherent interest in the "structure of time." This structure of time can be articulated more specifically by saying that the structure of time is really "critical moments [in history] that determine future developments."[9]

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[6] William James, *Writings, 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 249. James specifically uses the character of Miss Bates from *Emma* to provide a popular example of a "figure known to us all" who displays the ability for what he terms, *impartial redintegration*, or *total recall* (italics James's). Miss Bates displays the ability to "spare you no detail, however petty, of the fact they are recounting, and upon the thread of whose narrative all the irrelevant items cluster as pertinaciously as the essential ones, the slaves of literal fact, the stumblers over the smallest abrupt step in thought."

[7] Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 89.

[8] Ibid., 91.

[9] Ibid., 95-96.

Given the fact that Williams was more than just a fiction writer, his dedicated studies as an academic of Renaissance drama and poetry is evinced by his publication of an anthology of *English Renaissance Poetry*.[10] As a student of the cultural aspects of early modern England, Williams took his understanding of Tacitean historiography and embedded it within his narratives. This understanding provides a deeper sense of Williams's ability to portray historically realistic fiction. Williams is very interested in portraying stories with characters that are embedded in and with historical contexts. These stories, in a Tacitean sense, need to be driven by strong yet flawed characters.

Williams's understanding of Tacitean historiography helped form his narratives in a way that engages the reader on a deeper level. "As for form," writes Fredric Jameson in his preface to George Lukacs' "monumental" exploration and explanation of the genre of the historical novel "it [the historical novel] is also a mediatory field."[11] The "formal specificity" that, according to Lukacs, defines the historical novel as a genre that provides mediation in the sense that it brings the reader into the specific time and place in which the narrative takes place. In other words, the historical novel acts as an object of mediation between the modern individual — or the reader — and the specific moment in history the narrative attempts to immerse its readership in.

The famed author, critic, and playwright Oscar Wilde notes a similar idea in relation to Lukacs, regarding not just literature, but literary criticism as well, which acts as a

[10] John Williams, *English Renaissance Poetry: A Collection of Shorter Poems from Skelton to Johnson* (New York: NYRB, 2016)

[11] Frederic Jameson, "Preface," in *The Historical Novel* by Georg Lukacs (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 2.

mediator between the individual and the literary such as it is. In *The Critic as Artist* — a dialogical essay-style play in which two characters, Ernest and Gilbert, are discussing the issue of memoir and history in their broadest terms — Wilde articulates this mediation in a way only he can, by saying:

> This is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. It is the only civilized form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind... His [the critic] soul aim is to chronicle his own impressions. It is for him [mas as critic as artist] that pictures are painted, books written, and marble hewn into form.[12]

Both Williams's biographer (Charles Shields) and archivist (Anne Marie Candido) discuss how meticulous Williams's notes were in preparation for his novels. His notes were prepared and executed in such a way that, when he went to sit down and write the story itself, there was no question as to where the characters would find themselves, because the decisions had already been made. Williams mentioned in an interview with *The Denver Post* that, because of the thoroughly detailed notes he made in preparation for his novels, he would be able to, in theory, "sit down and write the entire novel without pausing."[13] This level of preparation to the writing process shows how seriously Williams thought about what he wanted his readers to take away from his work. Certainly, every decision made in a work of literature is a deliberate one and it is worth considering what effect it has on the work itself and the thoughts of the author.

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[12] Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Aldington (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 83.

[13] Anne Marie Candido, "*Stoner* and the John Williams Papers," *Denver Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2021): 107-18.

One recurring phrase that always comes to mind when attempting to categorize Williams's work is the phrase "historical realism." Like all works of historical realism, the reader gets a sense of being transported to that specific time and place. Most of the critical conversation surrounding Williams's work begins by noting the historical realism present in all three of his novels. For example, Heilman's review of *Butcher's Crossing* in *The Partisan Review* (1961) states that Williams makes "literary art of the history of the west"[14]; Maureen Clark notes that *Stoner* provides "historical context" for the life of a university professor surrounding both world wars[15]; and Asquith states that, in many ways, *Augustus* is the "ideal subject for a historical novel."[16]

Drawing from hermeneutic distinctions of surface and depth in medieval studies, Ethan Knapp points out how these distinctions can play a role in modernist and realist interpretations as well. Knapp makes an interesting point that secular hermeneutic allegoresis, pioneered by Frye and later by Jameson, embeds itself within a strict theological history from the Catholics to the Protestants that championed the same practice regarding religious texts. Ultimately, Knapp seeks to answer the question "what is it that constitutes [literary] depth within this tradition?"[17] Both Frye and Jameson posited that the language used to express criticism and allegory is fundamentally

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[14] Robert B. Heilman, "The Western Theme: Exploiters and Explorers," Review of *Butcher's Crossing*, by John Williams, *Partisan Review*, March-April, 1961, 287.

[15] Maureen Clark, "Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams's *Stoner*," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 2 (2017): 1.

[16] Mark Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams: A Flaw of Light* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 115.

[17] Ethan Knapp, "Reading Allegory in a Secular Age: Mid-Century Theology and the Allegoresis of Frye and Jameson." *Exemplaria* 26, no. 2-3 (2014): 164.

allegorical in nature, and this allegory provides that depth. This allegory presents itself in Williams's work — for example: Noami Oreskes has pointed out that Williams's first novel, *Butcher's Crossing* should not necessarily be considered a novel within the Western genre, but rather should be considered a superior example of environmental writing that, among other things, attempts to warn of the total destruction of natural resources for profit.[18] *Stoner* and *Augustus*, under this same sort of allegorical reading, can be seen as, in the "receding influence of the religious sphere in public life,"[19] narrative defenses of the philosophical *Weltanschaung*[20] which asserts stoic philosophy as a valid ethical path to virtue. In doing so, Williams is offering his readers an alternative to the conventional hero archetype by portraying a character whose heroic qualities stem from their calm and thoughtful reflection, rather than from impulsive action.

* * * * * * * *

John Williams, as the title of his biography would suggest, is the *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel*. Of course, there's really no such thing as "the perfect novel," at least not in any objective sense. Morris Dickstein, the esteemed university English professor and literary critic responsible for the hyperbolic phrase that would eventually inspire the title of Williams's biography, certainly seemed to think that there was a certain kind of

[18] Naomi Oreskes, "The Bloody Autumn of *Butcher's Crossing*: *Butcher's Crossing*, John Williams," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 419-32.

[19] Knapp, "Reading Allegory in a Secular Age: Mid-Century Theology and the Allegoresis of Frye and Jameson," 163.

[20] Freud's use of the German word for "worldview."

subjective perfection to *Stoner*. Such exaggerated language is great for selling books, but to what unattainable "perfection" is Dickstein referring? Though certainly not perfect — as feminist literary critics Katharine Coldiron[21] and Elaine Showalter[22] have pointed out— Dickstein goes on to describe why he believes the novel to be so, in his opinion, perfect. *Stoner* is "so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, that it takes your breath away."[23] With illusions of perfection aside, the previous quote is true, not just of *Stoner*, but of Williams's two other major novels as well, *Butcher's Crossing* and *Augustus*. The criticisms of Coldiron and Showalter were specifically levied against *Stoner* and will therefore be discussed in further depth, length, and specificity within chapter two of this thesis, which deals with *Stoner* specifically. Coldiron and Showalter's feminist criticisms of *Stoner* as a novel seem to have come as a result of the book's literary resurrection from obscurity in 2006. Their concerns center around William's portrayal of his wife Edith and Stoner's relationship with her. Their concerns with Williams's portrayal of Edith, it would seem, become complicated in comparison with Williams's portrayal of Julia, Augustus's daughter in *Augustus*. Though Showalter and Coldiron accurately point out Edith's one-sided and sexist portrayal in *Stoner*, Williams provides a very in-depth look into how Augustus's draconian marriage laws affected the body and mind of his own daughter by depicting her journal as an integral part of Book II

[21] Katharine Coldiron, "The Man Who Wrote the Mediocre Novel," *The Establishment*, October 30, 2017.

[22] Elaine Showalter, "Classic 'Stoner'? Not so Fast," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2015.

[23] Morris Dickstein, "The Inner Lives of Men," review of *Stoner*, by John Williams, *New York Times Book Review*, June 17, 2007.

of the narrative. The epistolary form that Williams presents *Augustus* in affords him the time and space necessary to present Julia's thoughts in her reflections of her state of banishment on the island of Pandeteria. This reading of Julia in *Augustus* complicates Coldiron's and Showalter's critiques of Williams's ability to only portray female characters in a one-sided and unfair manner because Williams captures Julia's voice and concerns in a way that distinguishes her as intelligent, complex, and free-thinking.

Though all three of Williams's novels are very different in setting and scope — so different in fact, that it can be difficult to detect from an initial reading that they were all written by the same author[24] — there does seem to be certain throughlines that link Williams's three major novels together in meaningful and interesting ways. The first throughline present in Williams's work presents itself in the underlying philosophical investigation at the heart of each novel. The second throughline present in Williams's fictional works is the careful attention and emphasis each narrative gives to his three central protagonists. Commenting on all three of Williams's novels in 1974 — in the immediate wake of the publication of his 1973 National Book Award winning novel *Augustus* — literary critic Rexford Stamper points to:

> A recurrent them [in all three of his novels] — moral decisions are at best uneasy compromises between a character's innate, unique personality and the overpowering political, economic, social, and hereditary forces that limit the range of moral options available at any particular time. His novels are an equal blend of history and fiction, time and personality, tradition and innovation.[25]

[24] Alan Prendergast, "The John Williams Revival," *Denver Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2021): 103.

[25] Rexford Stamper, "An Introduction to the Major Novels of John Williams," *Mississippi Review* 3, no. 1 (1974): 89.

So, for Stamper, Williams's novels have a moral aesthetic that limit themselves in scope by the parameters of personality and society. To this effect, Williams was deliberate in his attempt to investigate moral and philosophical issues and queries with his literature. Williams, in discussing his own work and process towards writing fiction, said that the act of writing a novel is not so much an attempt at narrative explanation, but rather at philosophical exploration: "I have found that the Knowledgeable act of writing a poem or a novel or an essay is a means not of self-expression (which is of little importance in a literary sense) but of contemplation"[26] (parenthesis Williams's). For Williams, then, in his own words, his works are meant as a contemplative exercise for the purpose of understanding human experience.

Another notable throughline present in Williams's three major novels explores the ways in which youthful hopes are shaped, altered, and potentially even negated by life's accidents.

> His characters experience a moment of youthful illumination, which compels them to strike out West [*Butcher's Crossing*], to fall in love with literature [*Stoner*], or to become emperor of Rome [*Augustus*] — a moment that promises self-definition but proves flawed.[27]

So then here, for Asquith, Williams's stories are expressions of youthful exuberance that initially show self-defining and self-fulfilling promises, but are then showed, through experience, to be flawed and ultimately unfulfilling over time. The initial hopes, goals, dreams, and idealisms of youth, once actually attained, seem to never quite live up to what Williams's characters had expected them to be when built up in their own complex

[26] Shields, *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel*, 96.

[27] Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*, 1.

inner world. The discrepancy in Williams's work between what his characters initially expect to achieve and attain and what they actually end up with when it is all said and done is quite palpable.

For example, Will Andrews, the main character in *Butcher's Crossing*, starts out by believing he will attain a deeper inner peace and understanding of himself once he finally lives a life in which communing with nature is a part of his daily existence. This belief comes as a result of having been persuaded by Emerson, after having attended one of the famous philosophers' public lectures, that a modern, urban existence will never be fulfilling to the inner human soul, which yearns to experience nature in all her untrammeled and untouched perfection. However, after he experiences the brutality with which such a communion with nature entails, Andrews becomes numb with disillusion. William Stoner, once he has his epiphanic experience in Professor Sloane's class after reading William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*, falls in love with literary studies and pursues this deep personal interest with a career as a university English professor.[28]

Another throughline present in Williams's work, as previously discussed, attempts to either call into question — as is the case with *Butcher's Crossing* — or promulgate — as is the case with *Stoner* and *Augustus* — a specific philosophical and moral aesthetic or school of thought. Philosophy, for Williams — and indeed for the ancient Stoics whose wisdom he draws from in *Stoner* and *Augustus* specifically — is not just an abstract description of the material world. Stoicism is — unlike other ancient philosophical schools of antiquity — a philosophy of life most interested in ethics and serves as a path

[28] This will be discussed further down in greater detail in the second chapter *Stoner*.

to live one's life in the best manner possible. In concordance with the idea that philosophy should not just be a way of seeing the world, but rather as a way of acting within the world, J. H. Bernard, translator for Kant's *Critique of Judgment* states that "a complete philosophy includes practice as well as theory; it has to do not only with logic, but with life."[29]

Most philosophical schools of thought during the classical period in antiquity attempted to map language onto reality by describing what was observed and then making logical inferences based on those observations. In a sense, most philosophical schools of ancient Greece and Rome were interested with the natural world of physics, and not with the inner worlds and psychological nuances of men.

The purpose of philosophy, for the stoics, was to master the art of living. Discernment and virtue are two of the central doctrines, or first principles, to stoic philosophy. Discernment is the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff. Virtue is to be sought after and chosen for its own sake, for the sake of being virtuous because that is the only good. On the principle of discernment as virtue, we have Seneca's beautiful articulation of what he thought stoic philosophy, in part, was meant to impart. As referenced in the epigraph to this project, it is worth repeating here:

> Will I not walk in the footsteps of my predecessors? I will indeed use the ancient road — but if I find another route that is more direct and has fewer ups and down, I will stake out that one. Those who advanced these doctrines before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth lies open to all; it has not yet been taken over. Much is left also for those yet to come.[30]

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[29] J. H. Bernard, "Introduction," to *The Critique of Judgment* by Immanuel Kant (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), xv.

[30] William O. Stephens, "The Stoics and their Philosophical System," in *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020), 22.

We get a sense here that Stoicism, as a philosophy, involves accepting what is useful from those we have inherited the world from, while still being able to see what needs to be updated and how to best go about the process of updating itself.

The stoics can be understood as being able to develop, self-transform, and adapt their philosophy (and themselves) in a way that fits the cultural context of the time. In the same way that medicine attempts to cure diseases of the body, the stoics understood and believed that philosophical ethics, used as guiding principles, can be used to cure one's soul. Diseases of the soul can arise from frequently succumbing to one's passions and desires. Ethics then becomes the focal concern for all later Stoics. The three parts of Stoicism are as follows: ethics, logic, and physics. No one part is necessarily placed over the other, but each one can inform the other. Stoicism, as it evolves as a moral philosophy, through Freud, essentially becomes ground zero for the development of cognitive behavioral therapy.[31] "If Philosophy is seen as therapy" writes professional Psychoanalyst Douglas Kirsner, "the stoical stance can be understood as a way of mastering the external reality and a way of living. Philosophy was no arcane activity [for the Hellenistic philosopher] but a practical therapeutic endeavor. It was a practice for the soul as medicine was for the body."[32] Indeed, even narrative as such stands as the current cornerstone of modern behavioral therapy. Monika Fludernik writes in her introductory

[31] Georgia Mouroutsou, "Moral Philosophy in the Imperial Roman Stoa," in *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[32] Douglas Kirsner, "Freud, Civilization, Religion, and Stoicism," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 23, no. 2 (2006): 357.

chapter to narrative and narrating that, "It is therefore not surprising that psychoanalysis should have incorporated the telling of the patient's life story into the therapeutic process."[33]

Stoicism, as articulated by Spinoza in his treatise on ethics, synthesizes stoic and epicurean philosophies in a way that derives valid actions, schools-of-thought and worldviews, from observations of nature. He argues that things change, not by anyone's will, but by the randomness of nature. The stoics saw this as fact, and that the job of the stoic was to maintain an internal calm and sense of direction despite the ever-present chaos in the world around the stoic subject. This maintenance of an internal calm is explicitly written out in Williams's character notes for Stoner when he mentions that, in practice, William Stoner should be seen as being able to "never lose an external peasant calm that characterizes him as a youth. [he should seem to be] Quiet, stubborn, apparently lethargic even in the face of violence. Stoical."[34]

Both the Stoics and Spinoza take literally Plato's idea that the ability to act and be acted upon is the essence (the necessary and sufficient cornerstone) of existence. Since only bodies have this ability to at once act and be acted upon, only bodies exist, and therefore the entire universe is a single body in that it has the ability to act and be acted upon simultaneously. It is impossible to predict these actions, and since nature acts upon bodies in an infinitely random way, it is the Stoic's job to maintain a level head in the

[33] Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 1.

[34] Candido, "*Stoner* and the John Williams Papers," 110.

face of the randomness of nature.[35] This, as we shall see, is the world view that Williams embodies William Stoner and Octavius Caesar with, in both *Stoner* and *Augustus* respectively.

If, for Williams, literature is the laboratory of philosophy, then his main characters are the men who embody an ethic, an ideal, a certain outlook and philosophy of life, which is then pitted against the world they inhabit. This ethic, by Williams's own admission and design, seems to be stoical in nature. This stoic ethic, in the example of William Stoner, is being constructed through the language used to describe this character's interactions with other characters and the world around him. In a literary sense, these philosophical tenets are best described through the embodiment of character rather than in the assertion of non-fictional propositions. In this sense, "writers are not obligated to unfold a philosophical argument in a technical and precise philosophical language; it is enough to show such a philosophical position through the dialogues and minds of the fictional persons, and in their mundane, non-philosophic language."[36]

Michel Foucault pointed out that stoic philosophy's ultimate aim was the elimination of indecision. This stoic telos is central to the idea that certain philosophies are meant to be lived out and embodied as a way of life. Foucault's observation, in line with other philosophy scholars and historians of philosophy alike, comes from a reading of the many stoic texts available to him at the time in which he summarizes the information therein with a central telos of eliminating indecision. He derives this summary, in part, from a

[35] Jon Miller, "Spinoza and the Stoics on Substance Monism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[36] Harshav, *Explorations in Poetics*, 14-15.

letter written by Seneca where he is grappling with the determination to maintain a solidified aim towards a certain end goal.[37] We see this in both *Stoner* and *Augustus*, wherein the guiding decision-making mechanism for the two main characters lies in the attainment of a single goal. For *Stoner*, it is his pursuit of literary scholarly knowledge, and the ability to teach at the university he has come to know and love. However, as we will see, this single-minded pursuit can be seen as crippling to his personal relationship with his wife, his friends, and his parents. For Octavius, it is the fulfillment of his uncle Julius's wishes and the expansion and glorification of his beloved Roman empire.

The primary attention given throughout each novel to a single character similarly unites Williams's three major works in a meaningful way. Though this certainly doesn't make his novels unique in any sense, the amount of time given over to the interiority of his main characters throughout the narrative strikes the reader as a centrally important feature. Williams seems genuinely interested in the forces that internally motivate individuals to act in a self-defining manner. Will Andrews could have stayed at Harvard, obtained his degree, and most likely would have had a successful and normal life, but he chose to strike out west and pursue self-transcendence through an Emersonian communion with nature. William Stoner could have just as easily continued with his agrarian studies, returned to his parent's farm with updated knowledge on how best to yield more crops form the earth, and lived a life of quiet, solitary labor like his parents before him; but rather, due to an intensely defining encounter in a required survey course

[37] Robin Weiss, "Stoicism and its Telos: Insights from Michel Foucault," *Metaphilosophy* 51, nos. 2-3 (April 2020): 335-54.

on English literature, deliberately chose to go against his preconceived notions of what his parents wanted for him, and what he thought he wanted for himself, and heroically pursued his personal interest in literature. Octavius Caesar could have just as easily followed the wishes of his mother and stepfather and had a quiet reserved life free from stress and turmoil that comes with being the emperor of the Western world — which would have been more in harmony with his blasé and even-keeled temperament (as he is portrayed in Williams's novel, at least) but felt that he owed it to himself and his uncle Julius to see his final wish granted.

Noting another throughline present in Williams's three major novels, Allan Prendergast comments on Williams's prose by explaining that the enduring appeal of all three of his novels lies in the fact that "they all contain the same measured voice, the same distinctively and deceptively simple prose, void of ornament and distraction."[38] Not only are Williams's novels centered around a main hero, the three heroes present in his three main novels share a quest and journey to understand themselves. This journey of self-discovery seems to be centered around internal forces that drive his main character's individual interests. These main characters are unaware of the source or reasoning for these motivations (indeed internal motivations and interests cannot often be explained in reasonable terms), and yet pursue them anyway. Prendergast, journalist and avid reader of Williams's work, noticed the same throughline in his novels by pointing out that:

> His protagonists see their ideals smashed and their notions of who they want to be violated by the encroachment of the world, yet ultimately, they gain something much more important — a sense of who they truly are. As the Williams revival

[38] Prendergast, "The John Williams Revival," 103.

demonstrates, that process is rarely as straightforward as it sounds. It can be the journey of a lifetime.[39]

Another throughline present in Williams's three major novels presents itself as a pervasive sense of loneliness. This sense of loneliness can first be seen in the extreme isolation Will Andrews and his three hunting companions endure after having been trapped by a wall of snow and ice in a secluded valley in the Rocky Mountains. William Stoner, by virtue of his reserved and quiet temperament, his upbringing, and the profession he pursues, seems to be constantly alone, no matter who he is forced to interact with professionally or otherwise.

Similarly, although Octavius Caesar acquires the seemingly enviable position of emperor of Rome, Williams's narrative is composed in such a way as to make it seem that it can indeed be quite lonely at the top of the world, given that such places are usually only reserved for one. Asquith then goes on to agree with Frank when he notes that, although Williams's straightforward prose is more stylistically in line with the works of great-American novelists like Hemingway and Steinbeck, Williams's novels, in a thematic sense, offer an existentialism on-par with the likes of Camus and the French existentialists.[40] This existentialist influence makes perfect sense, according to Asquith, "since it's flag bearers — Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir — were taking America by storm during the period when Williams was working on his novels."[41]

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[39] Ibid., 105.

[40] Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*, 1.

[41] Ibid., 10.

*Butcher's Crossing* perfectly exemplifies the historical fiction genre because it sets itself in the post-Civil-War Era of the American West, at the height of Western expansion, and provides a realistic addition to the western genre. The novel strips itself of, as one critic pointed out back in the 60s, the false glory surrounding the ideology of manifest-destiny that was supposedly to be found in the exploitation of the resource-rich American West that was being promulgated and propagandized at the time. His second novel, *Stoner*, follows the life of an English professor at the University of Missouri — a life that starts at the end of the 19th century and ends in the late 1950s (a few years before the book itself was published). His third and final book, *Augustus*, is an epistolary novel set-in ancient Rome that follows the titular historical character's rise to power and subsequent life as ruler of the Roman Empire in the wake of the assassination of his uncle, Julius Caesar. Writing in the turmoil and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 70s, his contemporary cultural moment would have been fixated on the historical development of America as a global empire, and on empire such as it was understood at that time in history. *Butcher's Crossing*, in part, is a story about how Western expansion contributed to America's domination of most of the North American continent, which certainly has global implications — and Augustus fixates itself on the development of the Roman empire as a historical example of a global empire under the aegis of Octavius Caesar.

Williams's ability to capture the genuine inner thoughts and concerns of his characters compels his readers into a deep level of understanding with his characters because they are the inner thoughts and concerns of his readers as well; he has found a way to articulate these real human issues in such a way that illicit an immediate belief in the character's seemingly genuine humanity. Steve Almond makes a similar point by

praising Williams's ability to articulate the innerworkings of Stoner's mind. According to Almond, the beauty and detail of Williams's articulation of Stoner's inner thoughts makes it hard to imagine that the author wasn't drawing form his own personal experiences and feelings as a university professor. However, as Elaine Showalter has accurately pointed out, "The novel [*Stoner*] is not autobiographical."[42] Though of course there are some similarities between the author and his character, as Shield's biography of Williams has showed to be in agreement of Showalter's assessment: "In contrast to the unadventurous, abstemious Stoner, Williams (1922-1994) was a hard-drinking, four-times married, successful professor of creative writing, a World War II airman who had flown the Hump in the Himalayas."[43] There is, however, something personal of Williams imbedded within the character of Stoner. According to Almond, the inner life of Stoner doesn't fictionalize a performative experience of internality, but rather Williams captures a shared and universal experience that draws the reader closer in understanding to the character.[44] This understanding of shared experience draws from the argument that Benedict Anderson makes in *Imagined Communities*. Anderson points out that, in the same way characteristics that constitute a shared sense of nationality construct themselves in a fictitious way that provides a sense of shared similarity and belonging[45] — the imagined community in a text like *Stoner*, for example, provides the implied

[42] Showalter, "Classic 'Stoner'? Not so Fast.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Steve Almond, *William Stoner and the Battle for the Inner Life*, (New York: IG Publishing, 2019).

[45] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991)

reader with a shared sense of experience to the main character for anyone who has ever been a part of a college campus community. Williams's sense of realism builds itself upon the shared experience of the implied author with the implied audience.

This sense of historical and characterological realism is one that Williams's critics have alluded to and danced around when talking about his novels but has yet to be explicitly stated so far. The literary critic Rexford Stamper mentions in *the Mississippi Review* that Williams's ability to overcome the hurdle of historical realism, which too often emphasizes setting over character, is what makes his novels so compelling. However, Stamper doesn't reference what then makes Williams's characters so *real*. This sense of realism in Williams's characters comes from the way that he portrays them as the real and tragic people they appear to be. They are real because they are deeply flawed, they fail and yet persist despite their initial failures. Williams's narratives themselves feel plausible and realistic, then, in this sense, because they are populated by such tragic and imperfect heroes.

Since Williams is writing in the genre of historical fiction, it can be easy to make the mistake, as an author, of bringing the setting to life in a realistic way instead of the characters. Stamper, in the following excerpt, praises Williams for his primary attention to character over setting:

> Although John Williams writes in the much over-worked and misunderstood genre of historical fiction, he manages to overcome the subordination of character to setting which is the most obvious fault in most historical fiction and to present the character as equal to the forces that shape his personality.[46]

[46] Rexford Stamper, "An Introduction to the Major Novels of John Williams," *Mississippi Review* 3, no. 1 (1974): 89.

A few of the aforementioned critics have pointed out that if Williams's novels all fall under the genre of "historical realism", they also subvert aspects of that genre and the other tangential genres within which his work can be classified. Heilman praises *Butcher's Crossing* for its ability to confront and critique the western genre head-on and subtly accuses the genre as-such for promulgating idealistic lies that had been pandered there within for far too long. In *Butcher's Crossing*, Heilman points out that "there are no reminiscences of a former greatness in the good and bad men, sheriffs and Indians, pioneers and profiteers"[47] which was prevalent in the pulp-western genre of the time. Though the novel is set during the post-civil-war era, in the 'wild-west', Williams resented the idea of *Butcher's Crossing* even being considered as a western, going so far as to reject a proposal from his publisher for a mass-market paperback printing of the novel (which certainly would've benefited Williams financially) because they wanted to advertise and sell it "as a western."[48]

Although it seems like it is the cynics who win out in the end in Williams's work, his main characters, the ones in which he is deeply invested and interested emotionally, "are the Stoics, those characters who never lose sight of the light to which they devote their lives."[49] So, if the heroes of Williams's novels are the stoics, what would classify them as such? The philosophy of stoicism centers around the idea that the individual human psyche exists outside the events of the natural world; and that though we cannot predict

[47] Heilman, "The Western Theme: Exploiters and Explorers," 228.

[48] Shields, *The Man who Wrote the Perfect Novel*, 120.

[49] Ibid., 1.

or control the events around us, or where our lives will lead, we can control how we react to the randomness and chaos we encounter. Epictetus, the famous stoic philosopher questions, "Do you want things that are not always in your power?" answer: "Be condemned, then, to hindrance, obstruction, failure."[50] Further on, he sums up his meditations on human will in relation to the chaos of the world by saying, "In a word, then, remember this, that, whenever you pay regard to anything outside of your will's control, you so far destroy your will."[51] The form of stoicism that seems to matter most to Williams's fiction is the contemplative form of writings found in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and the Socratic questioning and philosophizing found in *The Discourses of Epictetus* rather than with that of the Epicureans, for example, who are only interested in the attainment of happiness and pleasure and to avoid discomfort and pain. The stoicism of Aurelius and Epictetus — as with all the later stoics — is primarily concerned with ethics and with a radical acceptance to the randomness and chaos of the world, which is the kind of stoicism with which Williams builds William Stoner and Octavius Caesar. A sense of stoic detachment present in Aurelius and Epictetus permeates both *Stoner* and *Augustus*.

Williams, then, took this contemplative form of stoicism and applied it to both the lives of his characters and the prose in which he brings those characters to life. As a student of the poet and critic Yvor Winters, Williams believed that restraint and rational stoicism was the key to writing honorably. Williams himself said that "I write of human

[50] Epictetus, "The Discourses of Epictetus," trans. P. E. Matheson in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1940), 426.

[51] Ibid., 427.

experience so that I may understand it and thereby force myself into some kind of honesty."[52] This attempt at honesty, then, is what, for Williams, established both realistic characters and a realistic world for them to inhabit.

[52] Shields, *The Man who Wrote the Perfect Novel*, 98.

## Chapter One: *Butcher's Crossing*

In the introduction to this thesis, we discussed how Williams was developing and constructing heroic masculinity within his main characters. If his first published novel *Nothing but the Night* was an overly wrought psychological novel, then *Butcher's Crossing* stands as Williams's first attempt at a philosophical novel that seeks to embody the main character with a certain philosophical world view. This embodiment, ultimately, stands as a critique of what he saw as a mis-guided genre and a mis-guided philosophy. The mis-guided genre — the western — and the mis-guided philosophy — the Emersonian view of nature, are both being taken to task in Williams's mythic and tragic narrative. Possessing a Doctor of Philosophy degree in English Literature, Williams published not just creative work, but critical and academic work as well. Williams was very displeased with the way that western pulp-fiction of the 1960s was handling the story of the west such as it was being portrayed at the time. Williams published an essay called *The "Western": Definition of the Myth* in which he lays out his theories and ideas at the heart of *Butcher's Crossing*. The "Western" essay was published one year after *Butcher's Crossing* and essentially argues that Williams's contemporaries have treated the western theme as an epic rather than, as is argued in the essay, its proper form, which is mythic.

Williams seems to understand the initial reaction to classify the western as part of the epic tradition:

> Superficially, the Western adventure seems typically epic, compounded as it is of individual acts of bravery; of strength and endurance before dreadful hardships; of treks across unknown lands; of enemies subjugated and wild beasts slain; of heroes whose names have come down with legendary force. But despite its appearance, the adventure is not epical, and it is not so essentially.[53]

Although Williams understands this classification, an issue of definition still stands at the heart of the western theme. Since epics tend to offer nationalistic tales of bravery and conquering, subjugation and exploitation (the story of the journey into the American west can be seen as one of exploitation, but not *only* of exploitation) Williams asserts that "essentially" the story of the west isn't nationalistic in nature because "no national force stronger than himself pushed the American frontiersman beyond the bounds of his known experience into the chaos of a new land, into the unknown."[54] Williams here seems to be echoing Jungian literary psychoanalytic language, which asserts that the mythic hero is the one that ventures into the unknown and makes order out of chaos.

Will Andrews, the main character, and anti-hero of *Butcher's Crossing* is the ideal Emersonian man who desires "To go into solitude"[55] within nature and commune with it as pre-civilized man might have. Having grown up in Boston as the son of a middle-class preacher, he seems to feel a deep disconnect between the life he is currently living in the heart of modern civilization, and the life he seems to think he ought to be living, the one he was designed to live by his creator. The first thing Will Andrews does after finally

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[53] John Williams, ""The "Western": Definition of the Myth," in *John Williams: Collected Novels*, ed. Daniel Mendelsohn (New York: Library of America, 2021), 800.

[54] Ibid., 802.

[55] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Emerson: Essays & Poems*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America), 9.

arriving in the town of Butcher's Crossing, Kansas is to seek out a man by the name of J. D. McDonald, who tans and cures raw buffalo hides on-sight before shipping them to St. Louis for distribution into the fashion industry, in which buffalo hides were a desired commodity. Williams then goes on to make a subtle critique of market forces because, although McDonald has clearly invested his entire fortune in the buffalo hide business, he doesn't understand why anyone would buy one in the first place. Which, on the surface, doesn't make much logical sense from a personal, and even business standpoint: "Why they wanted them in the first place I don't know; you never can really get the stink out of them."[56]

When Andrews quickly finds Mr. McDonald in the small Kansas-territory town, on the border of "civilized" America and the "wild" and chaotic west, he tells McDonald that "My father has spoken of you often" and that his father "admired you because you were the only man he ever knew who came out here — who came west, and made a life for himself."[57] However, based on McDonald's reasoning (or rather un-reasoning) for going out west and establishing this life for himself, it is no surprise when we come to the end of the narrative as readers and find that it was doomed from the start. Despite this doomed start, Williams, here, is showing how admirable it was seen at the time for men to make their way west and "make a life" for themselves in that seemingly chaotic and uncivilized realm. To shake off the protections of civilization and embrace the unknown is undoubtedly being portrayed as admirable within this narrative. There is immediately a

[56] John Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* (New York: NYRB, 2007), 247.

[57] Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 18.

sense of an adventurous spirit within Will Andrews that mirrors McDonald's in their mutual adventure west.

McDonald states that "There ain't many like us out here. Men with vision." This adventurous spirit, motivated by Emerson's popular lectures and essays on nature at the time, compels some — like Will Andrews and McDonald — in a mythic and indescribable way into the unknown of nature unconquered by "civilized" man.

This indescribable nature of the heroic spirit to venture into the unknown is articulated by Williams during a scene just a few pages later when Andrews attempts to explain to Mr. McDonald why he is there in the first place. After having dropped out of Harvard College in his third year, he finds that, ultimately, he is unable to verbally articulate his internal motivation, and this inability-to-explain himself is narrated by Williams in the following manner:

> He tried to shape in his mind what he had to say to McDonald. It was a feeling; it was an urge that he had to speak. But whatever he spoke he knew would be but another name for the wildness that he sought. It was a freedom and a goodness, a hope and a vigor that he perceived to underlie all the familiar things of his life, which were not free or good or hopeful or vigorous. What he sought was the source and preserver of his world, a world which seemed to turn ever in fear away from its source, rather than search it out, as the prairie grass around him sent down its fibered roots into the rich dark dampness, the Wildness, and thereby renewed itself, year after year. Suddenly, in the midst of the great flat prairie, unpeopled and mysterious, there came into his mind the image of a Boston street, crowded with carriages and walking men who toiled sluggishly beneath the arches of evenly spaced elms that had been made to grow, it seemed, out of the flat stone of sidewalk and roadway; there came into his mind the image of tall buildings, packed side by side, the ornately cut stone of which was grimed by smoke and city filth; there came into his mind the image of the river Charles winding among plotted fields and villages and towns, carrying the refuse of man and city out to the great bay.[58]

[58] Ibid., 22.

Having grown up in ordered, civilized Boston, Williams tells us that Will Andrews seeks “wildness”. In essence, he is seeking chaos, or rather the borderline of chaos and order, which is where he finds himself, in the town of Butcher’s Crossing, Kansas, which lies on the border of civilization and the “wild west”. After this exploration of the “wildness” of the frontier, while he stands in an “unpeopled” and “mysterious” prairie, we are immediately told that into Will Andrews’s mind came visions of Boston: the ordered world he had left behind for this liminal borderland between known and unknown. This articulation of Emersonian transcendentalism stands as the philosophy at the heart of the character of Will Andrews, which is to escape and transcend the mechanized and modern world and find that part of the world in which wildness, chaos, and disorder still reign.

From a prose standpoint, one gets the sense that Williams portrays the universal and eternal struggle of every man to put into words the images that flash instantly within the theatre of the mind. This provides a wonderful illusion and sense of depth within his main character of *Butcher’s Crossing*, Will Andrews. Williams then provides his readers with the illusion of a complex inner turmoil within the minds of his characters by introducing the reader to that inaccessible theatre of the imagination. What we are reading here is an explanation of the struggle to make ourselves and our actions make-sense to those around us. The quick imagery we get inside Andrews’s mind of a “crowded Boston Street” which is so deliberately and methodically organized, which then leads into the putrid Charles dumping human waste into the Atlantic, is meant to show Will’s belief that this is not how man was meant to live, stacked on top of each other in buildings “packed side-by-side”. This complex internal imagery, presented here as free indirect discourse which

seems to come from the internal mind of the main character, summarized in Will's simple statement to McDonald, states that he "came out here to see as much of the country as I can, I want to get to know it. It's something that I have to do."[59]

This sense of feeling compelled to abandon urban Boston, explains Williams, comes from the fact that, Andrews's father, a unitarian minister, "encouraged his reading of Mr. Emerson, but had not, to his recollection, insisted that he read the Bible."[60] The Emersonian influence over the main character in this novel is meant to be immediately obvious — before the reader even encounters the first word of the first chapter, he is greeted with two epigraphs, one from *Nature*, by Emerson, and one by Melville, from *The Confidence Man*. The first, though a beautifully and poetically written statement on the sanctity of nature, which has the epic and contradictory power to make isolation somehow not feel lonely, is made to seem absurd by comparison to the excerpt that follows from Melville:

> Aye, and poets send out the sick spirit to green pastures, like lame horses turned out unshod to the turf to renew their hoofs. A sort of yarb-doctors in their way, poets have it that for sore hearts, as for sore lungs, nature is the grand cure. But who froze to death my teamster on the prairie? And who made an idiot of Peter the Wild Boy?[61]

The answer to Melville's last two questions here is undoubtedly Nature. Emerson himself is then the mis-guided poet who, though certainly in possession of the ability to convince one through poetic language of the medicinal quality of nature, the truth of Emerson's

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., 45.

[61] Second epigraph presented in *Butcher's Crossing*, pg. 4.

initial claim, then, when compared to Melville, has been weighed and found wanting. Despite the elegant and poetic style of Emerson, the truth-claims he asserts don't hold water. At the beginning of Emerson's essay on Transcendentalism, he explains that, essentially, there are only two types of thinkers: materialists and idealists. Materialists are essentially empiricists, which are those who see the world as it is, as it can be measured, and the idealists see the world as it could be. Emerson, the idealist, erroneously sees nature as having a restorative affect, while Melville, the realist, sees it as that which freezes, that which kills, that which makes an idiot of, and that which, ultimately, is indifferent to human life.

This idealism, ultimately, is being critiqued and shot down within the character of Will Andrews. This character, who embodies Emerson's call for such a "natural" life, is not restored by nature, but is instead transformed into a hardened and callous version of his previous self. The language here is indeed transformative, but it does not describe a restoration, but rather a deterioration:

> Day by day he felt the skin of his face hardening in the weather; the stubble of hair on the lower part of his face became smooth as his skin roughened, and the backs of his hands reddened and then browned and darkened in the sun. He felt a leanness and a hardness creep upon his body; he thought at times that he was moving into a new body, or into a real body that had lain hidden beneath layers of unreal softness and whiteness and smoothness.

Here, we get a literal transformation provided by nature, taking Will's body from "soft" and "smooth" to "hard" and "dark". We get the sense that the society of Boston was only ever offering a protection to Will from nature, and that his softness and whiteness was a representation of that protection. Nature, then, restores Will to the calloused and indifferent creature he would be without such protection and shelter. In this shelter of

society, Will was swayed by the poetic language of Emerson because he had no reason to believe that nature could be anything other than restorative and benevolent, like Emerson claimed, because he had no empirical evidence of his own to state or know otherwise. However, once he gets his first experience of a Buffalo kill, a necessary enterprise for survival on the frontier at the time, we start to see him disassociate from the sheltered idealist he once was in Boston into the empiricist who sees the world as it appears. At the end of his introductory paragraph to *The Transcendentalist*, Emerson concludes with the following sentence: "Every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist."[62] In part, the story of Will Andrews in *Butcher's Crossing*, narratively refutes this claim. Will Andrews, the Emersonian idealist, returns to materialism after a prolonged encounter with nature. This narrative underscores the unavoidable reality that nature comprises itself solely of the material, and no amount of projected idealism can alter this fact.

As previously discussed, Williams's body of work revolves around genre subversion, a theme that is exemplified in *Butcher's Crossing*. As a grand critique of the western genre, it also challenges the philosophy of Emersonian transcendentalism that posits one's truest sense of self can be discovered through solitary communion with nature. Plotz argues in his reading of *Butcher's Crossing* that embracing the Emersonian philosophy amounts to naivety in the extreme. One's solitary communion with nature will only establish nature's grand indifference — if not outright hostility — to man's

[62] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," in *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, ed. Joel Porte and Harold Bloom, 193-209. New York: Library of America, 1996.

existence. This Emersonian naivety has led to the rapacious relationship man has, and seems to continue to have, with nature. Plotz then goes on to classify *Butcher's Crossing* — along with McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, as a "revisionist western"[63], which seems aptly termed. In addition, Plotz categorizes *Butcher's Crossing* as an "anti-western" novel, a phrase that captures the essence of the book in a single term. In consideration of essence and themes regarding *Butcher's* Crossing, towards the conclusion of Plotz's essay, he poses the question: "So what does Williams want his readers to make of Andrews's Emersonian optimism and Miller's pragmatic murderousness?"[64] According to Plotz, Williams wants his readers to experience how it feels when nature tugs at us, and that naïve optimism and satanic brutality are both unwise responses to the randomness of nature and the world.

Anthony Hutchison seems to be in strict agreement with Plotz in his analyzation of *Butcher's Crossing* in *Western American Literature* by pointing out aspects of his ability to subvert the established cannon of cowboy literature and the western genre as-such, which was so commercially successful at the time of its original publication. Hutchison points out that there was and still is an overly romanticized view of man existing in his truest form when he is communing with the natural world. Hutchison points out that this innate harmony, in the eyes of Williams, was a lie popularized by Emerson, and that nature's grand hostility is all you will find when doing so. There is a brutal realism,

[63] John Plotz, "*Butcher's Crossing*: John Williams," in *B-Side Books: Essays on Forgotten Favorites*, ed. John Plotz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 227.

[64] Ibid., 229.

according to Hutchison, to *Butcher's Crossing* that doesn't romanticize the natural world at all, and in fact shows nature in all of its indifference and horror.

One article found in the corpus of the critical literature surrounding Williams's work offers an alternative reading of *Butcher's Crossing* mentioned in the introduction, suggesting that the novel is not so much a critique of the western genre, but rather a superior example of environmental writing. Naomi Oreskes, the critique that put for such a claim, believes that *Bucher's Crossing* attempts to, among other things, warn of the total destruction of natural resources for the sake of profit alone. In *Butcher's* Crossing, the last great herd of buffalo in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions of the US serves as the novel's central natural resource. Mountain region. Noami Oreskes notes that Williams's novel presents a portrayal of not just how "American men destroyed the American buffalo" but also of how some men attempt to define themselves through sex and slaughter.[65] Her discussion of *Butcher's Crossing*, as an environmentalist novel, points to the importance of the character of McDonald as the voice of reason within the narrative. Like *Stoner*, *Butcher's Crossing* imparts a moral tale that merits articulation and assertion, cautioning against destruction and consumption disguised as self-improvement, as argued by Oreskes.

Self-improvement, as a matter of fact, was the reason under which Will Andrews set out west in the first place. Upon first meeting Mr. Miller, the man meant to show Will the country, he asks Will what he came out here for. After a few speculative back-and-forth bouts on behalf of Miller where he guesses at Will's reasonings for such a trip, Will

[65] Oresekes, "The Bloody Autumn of *Butcher's Crossing*: *Butcher's Crossing*, John Williams," 420.

responds with, “It’s not for any of those reasons. It’s for myself.”[66] Will believed, as influenced by Emerson, that self-improvement and self-transcendence would come from nature itself:

> He believed — and had believed for a long time — that there was a subtle magnetism in nature, which, if he unconsciously yielded to it, would direct him aright, not indifferent to the way he walked. But he felt that only during the few days that he had been in Butcher’s Crossing had nature been so purely presented to him that its power of compulsion was sufficiently strong to strike through his will, his habit, and his idea. He turned west, his back toward Butcher’s Crossing and the towns and cities that lay eastward beyond it; he walked past the clump of cotton-woods toward the river he had not seen, but which had assumed in his mind the proportions of a vast boundary that lay between himself and the wildness and freedom that his instinct sought.[67]

Williams, here, builds the character of Will Andrews around a search for “wildness”, “freedom” and ultimately chaos. Williams, here suggests that Will Andrews’s desire stems from an unignorable instinct that exists within his psyche. His desire to cross the physical “boundary” into unknown territory is “unconsciously” motivated and it is as if an unignorable magnetism is drawing him further and further into the heart of the Colorado territory.

As the narrative progresses and Will proceeds further and further into the wilderness, he doesn’t become more aware of himself; rather, the opposite happens, and he begins the slow transformation of shedding his Emersonian idealism with which he started out and begins to take on a numb, cold, and distanced persona:

> Day by day the numbness crept upon him until at last the numbness seemed to be himself. He felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape; sometimes one of the men would look at him, look through him, as if he did not exist; and he had to

[66] Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 71.

[67] Ibid., 48.

> shake his head sharply and move an arm or a leg and glance at it to assure himself that he was visible.[68]

Williams's explanation of Will's transformation takes on an exaggerated literal sense in that Will starts to become numbness itself. He begins to feel as if he lacks "identity or shape", therefore not being able to distinguish himself as an individual. Self-improvement and self-awareness, by definition, should lead to a heightened awareness of self, and here we have the exact opposite of that, which is a dissolving of the self into the landscape.

Similarly, as Will and his team begin the process of "harvesting" buffalo hides deep in a secluded valley in the Rocky Mountains, Will starts to witness first-hand the self-negation that takes place as they attempt to subdue nature. As Will's partner Miller begins the Buffalo slaughter, he starts to "see himself and Miller more clearly than he had before."[69] He doesn't see himself as more human, but rather as much, much less than human: as robotic and inert.

> During the last hour of the stand he came to see Miller as a mechanism, an automaton, moved by the moving herd; and he came to see Miller's destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood or a lust for the hides or a lust for what the hides would bring him, or even at last the blind lust of fury that toiled darkly within him — he came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to the life in which Miller had immersed himself. And he looked upon himself, crawling dumbly after Miller upon the flat bed of the valley, picking up the empty cartridges that he spent, tugging the water keg, husbanding the rifle, cleaning it, offering it to Miller when he needed it — he looked upon himself, and did not know who he was, or where he went.[70]

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[68] Ibid., 78.

[69] Ibid., 137.

[70] Ibid.

This description, within the world of the novel, takes place entirely as an articulation of how Will perceives Miller and himself. He starts to see himself as lost, he has begun to forget who he used to be and who he wanted to be. He had set out on a journey to find self-transcendence and self-reliance, but regresses into an automaton, a mechanism, and fails to recognize who he is or was. Ultimately, this seems to be the full-circle refutation of Emerson's claim that the materialist may become the idealist, but the idealist can't revert to the materialist. Will, as we have seen Williams unfold this narrative with philosophically charged language of chaos and order, becomes disillusioned with his communion with nature, returning from stary-eyed idealism back to numb materialism. As the narrative ends, and as Will enters back into Butcher's Crossing, Kansas, Williams describes a moment of self-realization for his main character about the nature of his regressive transformation away from idealism and into materialism:

> As if balancing himself finely at the edge of an abyss, he turned from the window and looked again at the sleeping figure of Francine. He could hardly recall, now, the passion that had drawn him to this room and this flesh, as if by a subtle magnetism; nor could he recall the force of that other passion which had impelled him halfway across a continent into a wilderness where he had dreamed he could find, as in a vision, his unalterable self. Almost without regret, he could admit now the vanity form which those passions had sprung.[71]

Here, we have the same language used earlier in the novel, a sense of being "at the edge of an abyss", the "magnetism" that drew him away from New England and into the Wild-West, where he would find "his unalterable self". Notably, Will's passions are regarded as "vain", even by himself. This excerpt makes it clear that the pursuit of self-

[71] Ibid., 272.

transcendence within an Emersonian view of nature, fueled by Will's own selfishness, has caused irreparable damage to himself and to his surroundings.

As a final example of the novel's aim to subvert the western genre, Williams concludes with: "Except for the general direction he took, he did not know where he was going; but he knew that it would come to him later in the day. He rode forward without hurry, and felt behind him the sun slowly rise and harden the air."[72] Here, Williams subverts the conventional cowboy trope of "riding off into the sunset," which typically characterized pulp-westerns of that time. In the same way he flipped the philosophy of Emersonian transcendentalism on its head through the character of Will Andrews — Williams doesn't give us the cowboy riding off into the sunset, instead we get the exact opposite, Will riding away from a sunrise.

[72] Ibid., 274.

## Chapter Two: *Stoner*

In writing *Stoner,* Williams presents us with what he thinks of as a real hero which, by definition, portrays someone worth emulating. Williams, in this portrayal, subverts the 'American Hero' trope, which Maureen Clark and Morris Dickstein both note is similar to Willa Cather's *The Professors House* in that, opposing Fitzgerald's heroic ideal of the "self-made man of mystery" in *The Great Gatsby*, William Stoner's life becomes "resigned to failure."[73] In the same way that Heilman praises *Butcher's Crossing* for its subversion of the western genre, Clark praises Williams for his subversion of the campus-novel genre while simultaneously criticizing the book for potential issues related to sexism and racism. In "Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American" Clark is questioning what American heroism looks like and if William Stoner as a hero is worth emulating. It would seem that if the person who takes the approach of quiet contemplation as opposed to immediate action can be considered heroic, then William Stoner is indeed a hero worth emulating. At the beginning of this article, Clark introduces the idea that *Stoner*, as a text, means to question and complicate "mythologized versions of modern American identity and way of life."[74] Furthering this theme of genre-subversion in *Stoner,* Clark says that the book "re-imagines stuff-of-dreams versions of the American cultural hero modelled

[73] Clark "Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams's *Stoner*," 4.

[74] Ibid., 1.

on the image of the brash, risk-taking, and economically successful individual of the 1920s decade."[75]

Asquith brings British novelist Julian Barnes into agreement with Clark when he offers a similar understanding of the peculiarity of William Stoner as a subversion of the typical American literary hero. Asquith quotes Barnes as he ponders reasons why *Stoner* was initially so commercially successful in Europe once translated than in comparison to its home country; "Barnes wondered whether readers brought up with a 'national character [that] is one of striving, of altering circumstances, rather than accepting them' might have had problems with a novel in which the central character is, in so many ways, a failure."[76]

Barnes further speculates that the European reading public seems to be drawn to William Stoner's "quiet passivity, lack of optimism, and sadness."[77] One gets the sense that Barnes and Clark are getting at the same idea here, which asserts that William Stoner, as a hero, stands as critique of the traditional American hero trope. William Stoner seems to be more in line with tragic heroes like Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger* than someone like Jay Gatsby. Like Meursault, William Stoner is the opposite of brash, risk taking, and economically successful. Barnes references novelist Sylvia Browning's point about William Stoner, in keeping with Clark's idea about *Stoner's* ability to subvert the great-American-hero trope, that as a hero, he "doesn't seem very

[75] Ibid.

[76] Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*, 3.

[77] Julian Barnes, "*Stoner*: The Must-Read Novel of 2013," review of *Stoner*, by John Williams, *The Guardian*, December 13, 2013.

American to me. We're such a country of maximalists, noisy ones, and though obviously there are exceptions, even our minimalists are spare and sad."[78] Williams, then, provides his readers with an antithesis to this hero-trope by writing someone whose heroic nature resides in their stoic contemplation as opposed to their brash impulse.

Alex Wolochs's book *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* begins with a discussion on a literary device known as the Proem. The Proem is a poetic and literary device that is "designed to encapsulate in miniature the entire poem which will follow."[79] Woloch states that this is a common occurrence, and therefore a "realized" and recognizable poetic device within Greek epic poetry. Woloch uses the following example from *The Iliad* to prove his point:

> *Wrath, goddess, sing, the wrath of Peleus' son Achilles*
> *and its devastation, which put a vast quantity of pain upon the Achains,*
> *hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls*
> *of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting*
> *of dogs, of all the birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished*
> *since that time when first there stood in division of conflict*
> *Atreus' son, the lord of men, and brilliant Achilles.*[80]

Provided with the opening stanza of *The Illiad*, we essentially have a summary of Achilles's journey from the beginning to the end of the epic narrative poem. In a similar fashion, Williams's *Stoner* opens in the exact same way, with a proem that is "designed to encapsulate in miniature the entire poem which will follow". Of course, *Stoner* is not a

[78] Ibid.

[79] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.

[80] Ibid., Woloch cites his source for the English translation used here of *The Iliad* as being taken from Lattimore's *Iliad of Homer*, with some modifications in translation of his own.

poem, and though written quite poetically, is in fact a work of narrative prose. Compare the first paragraph of *Stoner* with the first stanza, or proem, from *The Iliad* above:

> William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: "Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues."[81]

The reader gets the same information in the first paragraph of *Stoner* as they do in the first stanza of *The Iliad*. We are presented with the entire story in miniature, a poetic summation of the narrative to follow. In the first paragraph of *Stoner* — often described by other critics as a sort of eulogy for the main character, as a way of proceeding the tragic story of his life — the reader immediately confronts the fact that the story of William Stoner's life ends with his seemingly inconsequential death. However, we get a sense of the life lived and the path taken along the way from birth until death, and what was encountered on the path of this one man's life. This life, like everyone else's, cannot be replicated or relived in any detailed sense, but can certainly be learned from and appreciated for the way that person went about his work and his relationships with the ones he cared most for.

The proem that starts the narrative in *Stoner*, which serves as a kind of eulogy to the main character, is intriguing when we reflect on the fact that William Stoner, the

[81] John Williams, *Stoner*, 1.

protagonist, was a university English professor who taught classical works such as *The Iliad*, as well as other Greek and Roman epis and tragedies. “His dissertation topic had been “The Influence of the Classical Tradition upon the Medieval Lyric”” and the contentious graduate seminar he teaches in chapter nine during which he meets both his true romantic love interest — Catherine Driscoll — and the star pupil of his nemesis Hollis Lomax — Thomas Walker — covers the exact same topic as his dissertation.[82]

The reader gets the sense from this first paragraph that we will encounter a narrative about the life of a relatively unremarkable man, and here, in part, is where the historical realism of John Williams displays itself. William Stoner, then, as a character, immediately presents himself as an inconsequential historical figure. He is, in-fact, a meager university professor — and the reader, if he or she is inclined to think in such a way, will immediately grasp the inconsequentiality of his life. However depressing it is to admit, most lives are ‘inconsequential’ to the Author of the grand historical narrative. This, in the realm of stoic philosophical thought, is an unhelpful way of thinking about one’s life in relation to the broader world. In the same way that the reverse of the Delphic maxim “nothing to excess” holds when we say “everything in moderation”; if we start by rejecting the idea that nothing matters, then we immediately arrive at the point that everything matters. Therefore, what might at first appear inconsequential in the grand scheme of things — for example, literary pedagogy — becomes of the upmost importance.

[82] Ibid., 41.

In the same way that Williams structured the character of Will Andrews in *Butcher's Crossing* around the philosophical framework of Emersonian transcendentalism, we get the sense that Williams constructs William Stoner, as a character, around the tenants of Stoic philosophy. Williams portrays Stoner as contemplative, unguided by emotion, and relentless in his professional pursuits.

As Stoner progresses from his first year into his second at the university of Missouri, he switches his major from agriculture to English, a subject he seems almost religiously compelled towards. During his first quasi-religious experience in Professor Sloane's class, a mandatory survey in English Literature, his senses become intensely acute, as if he is seeing himself and the world around him for the very first time.

> Light slanted into the room from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a dimness; a student blinked, and a thin shadow fell upon a cheek whose down had caught the sunlight. Stoner became aware that his fingers were unclenching their grip on his desktop. He turned his hands about under his gaze, marveling at their brownness, at the intricate way the nails fit into his blunt finger-ends; he thought he could feel the blood flowing invisibly through the tiny veins and arteries, throbbing delicately and precariously form his fingertips through his body.[83]

The reader, here, gets the sense that Stoner experiences the world and himself in a way that he never has before. This experience, then, provides the impetus for the simple and seemingly inconsequential decision to change his major to English that results in a radically different life-outcome he might have had if he had stayed with Agriculture. He might have simply went back to work on his parents' farm had this one experience in this one class never occurred. Something seemingly so inconsequential on the surface — a

[83] Ibid., 13.

mandatory survey of English literature — suddenly becomes a pivotal and highly meaningful moment in the course of young Stoner's life.

Chapter two describes a second experience for Stoner that border on the religious and supernatural — as he completes his assigned reading in the attic bedroom of the Foote's farm:

> The past gathered out of the darkness where it stayed, and the dead raised themselves to live before him; and the past and the dead flowed into the present among the alive, so that he had for an intense instance a vision of denseness into which he was compacted and from which he could not escape, and had no wish to escape.[84]

Here, Williams articulates the inner thoughts and feelings Stoner is having as he is experiencing these deeply intense and lovely stories for the first time. The past makes itself manifest and alive again in the mind of the young William Stoner, and one gets the sense that this potentiality for immortality lies within each reader's mind; and that the mediators for this potentiality for immortality are the very epic poems and stories Stoner holds in his hands that he comes to love so dearly. This experience is articulated beautifully by John Williams here, but Stoner will eventually spend years and years during the early part of his teaching career struggling to try and articulate these complicated inner feelings in a way that might motivate similar feelings within the hearts and minds of his students. Williams follows this passage up with the ghosts of the literary past being summoned again, as they are summoned from reader to reader, in Stoner's room:

> Tristan, Iseult the fair, walked before him; Paolo and Francesca whirled in the flowing dark; Helen and bright Paris, their faces bitter with consequence, rose from the gloom. And he has with them in a way that he could never be with his fellows

[84] Ibid., 16.

> who went from class to class, who found a local habitation in a large university in Columbia, Missouri, and who walked unheeding in a midwestern air.[85]

Stoner's previous understanding of the world through hard-and-fast facts concerning the best possible methods of yielding crops from the earth was diametrically opposed to the imaginary and abstract world of classical literature. The world of Homer and Aeschylus are so different to that of William Stoner's, and yet he can't shake the inner voice telling him that there is some value to be had in a life spent studying these works of old and how they might have wisdom to bear on how we live our lives today. What we get in the following excerpt from *Stoner* is the ancient conflict between the world of science and empiricism and the world of art and literature.

> The course in soil chemistry caught his interest in a general way; it had not occurred to him that the brownish clods with which he had worked for most of his life were anything other than what they appeared to be, and he began vaguely to see that his growing knowledge of them might be useful when he returned to his father's farm. But the required survey of English literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before.[86]

This sense of being troubled and disquieted seems to be, for Stoner, the inspiration behind choosing to break away from an empirical understanding of the world and move towards a more romantically influenced understanding of it. Although, at first, William Stoner, "could not see the use of what he did," he still eventually makes consequential decisions with regards to his area of study:

> In the second semester of that school year William Stoner dropped his basic science courses and interrupted his Ag School sequence; he took introductory courses in philosophy and ancient history and two courses in English literature. In the summer

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid., 10.

> he returned again to his parents' farm and helped his father with the crops and did not mention his work at the University.[87]

Notably, Stoner's decisions stem from an indescribable desire that he cannot precisely articulate. It cannot be stated here whether he remains ignorant of it himself, is afraid to admit that his interests lie with the arts rather than with the sciences, or rather simply embarrassed to admit it to others at such a young age. However, we can say that, when confronted directly by Professor Sloane with a question that every collegiate senior nearing graduation dread to hear, "And what are your plans now?" — Stoner cannot come up with an answer: "this was something he had not thought about" Williams tells us, or at least "had not wanted to think about."[88] Of course, the ever observant and rational Professor Sloane goes on to point out the obvious to him, which is that "a serious student of literature *might* find his skills not precisely suited to the persuasion of the soil." Which is to say, that given William Stoner's clear personal interest in English Literature, which evinces his choice to switch his area of study entirely, surely there is some sort of reasoning for this, despite, at first, not being able to see "the use of what he did" with regards to the arts and humanities. It is Sloane once again, guiding the young and unsure William Stoner by explaining his own feelings to him, "But don't you know, Mr. Stoner.... don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher." To which Stoner asks, "are you sure?". Sloane explains it by echoing Williams's initial title for the book *A Matter of Love* by saying "It's love, Mr. Stoner, You are in love. It's as

[87] Ibid., 15.

[88] Ibid., 19.

simple as that." Love, then, is the answer to our earlier question about what Stoner's un-articulatable motivation for changing from the sciences to the humanities was.

However, love alone cannot sustain Stoner's interests in literature which will help move him towards a career in education, so Williams constructs the pursuit of this interest around the tenants of stoic philosophy. One of the tenants of Marcus Aurelius' and Epictetus's form of Stoic philosophy is a sense of detachment, which is a way of attempting to assert reason over the passions. However, "this is often misinterpreted as indifference to pain and pleasure in the sense of being almost ideally robotic." Although certainly not robotic, as Stoner is clearly seen pursuing his love for the art of literature, the attitude he takes towards the work necessary to make his career aspirations a reality is clearly stoic. Williams portrays Stoner as "doing his work at the University as he did his work on the farm — thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure not distress."[89] The sense of detachment necessary for such work is palpable here as Williams writes it, we can see Stoner taking a more dutiful and conscientious approach to the work necessary in order to achieve his aspirations, rather than an approach that involves passionate frenzy.

Furthering the natural progression of Stoner's life from this point on, Williams jumps right ahead to Stoner's career as a graduate student, which occurs whilst the start of WWI explodes into action as the Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated at Sarajevo. Stoner, in the construction of his character, presents to the reader as the opposite of a man that "reacts immediately and violently" to "historical change". In contrast to Stoner's quiet

[89] Ibid., 9.

passivity, we have his colleague Dave Masters — who enlisted into the Army to support America's involvement in the WWI effort[90]. Masters "had been sent to France and that almost exactly a year after his enlistment, with the first American troops to see action, he had been killed at Chateau-Thierry"[91]. Williams's straight-forward and matter-of-fact prose seems to suggest that Master's fate wasn't "deserved" by any stretch of the imagination because of his "direct action" and interest in aiding the war-effort, but rather it is worth pointing out, as Williams seems to suggest, that death can be and often is a consequence of being a "man of action".

In contrast, the heroism of William Stoner, then, isn't to be found in his need to prove his worth, maturity, or masculinity abroad in battle; but rather in his attempt to share that inarticulable inner delight he experiences when reading a sonnet by Shakespeare or a poem by Milton, with the broader population of undergraduates who happen to pass through his classroom doors.

Williams the academic and Williams the fiction writer had a lot in common. Williams the academic was very interested in Renaissance verse like Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*, and even organized an entire anthology of Renaissance verse titled *English Renaissance Poetry: A Collection of Shorter Poems from Skelton to Johnson*, as way of expanding and putting to use his doctoral dissertation on the English Renaissance poet Fulke Greville. This path of pursuing a deep personal interest that William Stoner finds himself on as a result of encountering *Sonnet 73*, although personally fulfilling, leads Stoner into an

[90] Masters did so almost immediately after the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1916, in retaliation to the sinking of the *Lusitania* nearly one year earlier.

[91] John Williams, *Stoner*, 39.

unforeseen life of despair and struggle — no one ever said love was easy. For reference, the pivotal Shakespearean sonnet in Stoner's life reads:

> *That time of year thou mayst in me behold*
> *When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang*
> *Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,*
> *Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.*
> *In me thou seest the twilight of such day*
> *As after sunset fadeth in the west,*
> *Which by and by black night doth take away,*
> *Death's second self that seals up all in rest.*
> *In me thou seest the flowing of such fire*
> *That° on the ashes of his youth doth lie,*
> *As the deathbed whereon it must expire,*
> *Consumed with that which it was nourished by.*
> *This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,*
> *To love that well which thou must leave ere long*.[92]

The choice to include *Sonnet 73* in the *Stoner* narrative was no accident, there are direct parallels between the implications of the poem, and the implications of Stoner's life. According to Walter Cohen, one of the general editors to the third edition of *The Norton Shakespeare*, and the critic responsible for the introduction to **The Sonnets** in the above volume, each quatrain in *Sonnet 73* "pursues a different metaphor as part of a single argument... all three quatrains use cyclical metaphors of life, death, and rebirth."[93] Cohen then goes on to explain that the imagery of fall that Shakespeare supplies at the beginning of this sonnet is meant to evoke images of a life come to its end. However, although there are mentions of enduring cyclical modes of nature — winter into spring, night into day, the phoenix eternally reborn in its own ash (itself an eternally circular

[92] William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 73," in *The Norton Shakespeare* third edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 2275.

[93] Walter Cohen, ed., "Introduction to The Sonnets" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016,) 2242-2243.

metaphor) — the poem ends without a return, pointing melancholically to death as the final cut in the cycle of human existence. The poem, then, as a poetic summary of the story of William Stoner, is a call to love someone (or in the case of *Stoner*, something, i.e., teaching and literature) "well" before you "must leave ere long". This is the only way, it would seem, according to John Williams and William Shakespeare, to fend off the anxiety that comes from the knowledge of the inevitability of your own and everyone you love's demise: which is to follow, in love, your instincts when it comes to the pursuit of your personal interests and passions in a similar way you might pursue a romantic interest. Cohen summarizes this idea in the following manner: "The destructive power of time is only partly counteracted by love."[94]

Ultimately, *Sonnet 73* summarizes the nature of love, whether it is a love for a person or a profession, in that, like the fall season, there comes an inevitable time when all things pass into winter and will eventually become no more. Given the fact that Williams's initial title for *Stoner* was 'A Matter of Love', we can easily presume from this that one of the central themes Williams had in mind for this narrative was centered around love and all of its many discontents.

Aijmer Rydsjo, contributing a chapter to the book *Engaging with Work in English Studies*, discusses a similar idea at the heart of *Stoner* by pointing out the relationship between identity and self-worth. The title of her contributed chapter borrows a note-worthy quote from *Stoner* in which a gregarious and articulate graduate-student colleague of William Stoner summarizes the work of an English professor by stating, "We do no

[94] Ibid.

harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it."[95] If one's sense of identity, according to Rydsjo, is tied to a sense of hard work in the production of something meaningful, then the production of meaningful work gets connected to the definition of a meaningful life. The work of educating, then, if viewed through the proper lens, and what Williams is attempting to, in part, show in *Stoner*, is that this type of work can be the most meaningful work one can hope to do. Especially if one is temperamentally and intellectually predisposed to such work, as William Stoner seems to be. There is a certain view of literary education present in Rysdjo's contributed chapter which sees it as having the ability to show students and readers of *Stoner* what a disciplined formation of character and self-reflection looks like. This is certainly part of the philosophical ethic Williams is trying to convey to his readers through his depiction of William Stoner.

The ability to build the character of William Stoner with the stuff of stoic ethics and virtue that reflect self-determination also allows Williams to give his main character the illusion of depth. Asserting the self-reflectiveness of the character of William Stoner implicitly suggests the existence of a self to reflect on. Williams builds this illusion of self-hood in William Stoner in the same way he built the illusion of self-hood in Will Andrews, by structuring his beliefs, thoughts, and actions around the tenants of stoic philosophy.

One of the main tenets of stoic philosophy holds that reason and the passions are in constant conflict, and that it is the role of the virtuous and heroic man to make decisions

[95] Celia Aijmer-Rydsjo, "'We Do No Harm, We Say Wat We Want, and We Get Paid for It': Academic Work and Dignity in *Stoner* by John Williams," in *Engaging with Work in English Studies*, ed. Alastair Henry and Ake Persson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021,) 69-95.

from a place of reason rather than passion. In one of the more famous stoic texts, *The Discourses of Epictetus*, the author explains that "of our faculties in general you will find that none can take cognizance of itself; none therefore has the power to approve or disapprove its own action."[96] The author goes on to explain what is meant by this through example:

> If you are writing to your friend, when you want to know what words to write grammar will tell you; but whether you should write to your friend or should not write grammar will not tell you. And in the same way music will tell you about tunes, but whether at this precise moment you should sing and play the lyre or should not sing nor play the lyre it will not tell you. What will tell you then? That faculty which takes cognizance of itself and of all things else. What is this? The reasoning faculty: for this alone of the faculties we have received is created to comprehend even its own nature; that is to say, what it is and what it can do, and with what precious qualities it has come to us, and to comprehend all other faculties as well.[97]

Reasoning, in this example, seems to govern decisions of relative unimportance: to write a letter to a friend, to play or not to play a song on the lyre. The supremacy of reason over the passions when considering minor decisions like these seems ideal and preferable; similarly, when one considers how to react to external forces outside of one's control, perhaps detached, unimpassioned, and reasonable outlooks on such external stimuli is the best way to go. However, can one use reason to determine one's *passion* in life, to choose a career path, to find love and a wife? This seems to be the question at the heart of the character of William Stoner that Williams, in part, is addressing. Given that humans are endowed with both reason and passions, surely there is a theatre or arena in which both can have their use and say. As we will see, a sense of reasoned and

[96] Epictetus, "The Discourses of Epictetus," 224.

[97] Ibid.

impassioned stoic virtue and duty can assist in the *attainment* of a desired profession or career, but it cannot tell you *which* field or line of work to pursue in the first place. Similarly, reason might indicate that companionship is better than loneliness, but it cannot indicate in whom to seek companionship with. As the character of William Stoner builds, we will see this conflict between the faculties of reason and passion played out. Oftentimes, however, reason and passion seem to negate themselves, leaving the character of Stoner to seem to the reader, like Meursault from *The Stranger*, frustratingly numb.

Even the name Stoner for a character is meant to evoke the inert and material soil on which he was raised. A soil upon which a man does his duty whether or not his passions wish him to or not. We are told in the fourth paragraph of *Stoner*, in which Williams begins to build his titular character, that "From the earliest time he could remember, William Stoner had his duties."[98] A sense of duty is the first pillar upon which this character is built and from which everything else stems. This sense of duty expresses not just the *nurturing* aspect of this fictional character — where he grew up – but in the *nature* of the character as well — which refers to his parents. Building off the "like father like son" trope, Williams presents Stoner's father as being similarly "stony" in both presentation and form. As for form, Williams tells us that "his [Stoner's] father.... looked at his thick, callused fingers, into the cracks of which soil had penetrated so deeply that it could not be washed away."[99] It is as if they are made of the very earth from which they

[98] Williams, *Stoner*, 4.

[99] Ibid., 6.

draw their livelihood. Later, as Stoner is explaining to his father his intention to remain in Columbia, at the university, to pursue a graduate education in English, we are told that "He [Stoner's father] listened to his [Stoner's] words fall as if from the mouth of another, and watched his father's face, which received those words as a stone received the repeated blows of a fist."[100] Though Stoner's father receives information the same way a brick wall receives a story, he remains the voice of reason, in relation to his son's trepid explanation of the pursuit of his passions, when he says that "If you think you ought to stay here and study your books, then that's what you ought to do."[101] His mother, after receiving this news, begins to cry, but she does so in the fashion of "one who seldom weeps"[102], offering another layer of 'stoniness' to the Stoner family, in which even the matriarch is seen as unimpassioned and uneasily moved.

As the narrative unfolds, we find Stoner as a PhD student in a bar with two of his colleagues. Because Stoner, as a character lacks an understanding of himself, Williams describes Stoner through the words and outlooks of another character, Dave Masters, the previously mentioned "man-of-action":

> Who are you? A simple son of the soil, as you pretend to yourself? Oh no. You, too, are among the infirm — you are the dreamer, the madman in a madder world, our own midwestern Don Quixote without his Sancho, gamboling under the blue sky. You're bright enough — brighter anyway than our mutual friend. But you have the taint, the old infirmity. You think there's something *here*, something to find. Well, in the world you'd learn soon enough. You, too, are cut out for failure; not that you'd fight the world. You'd let it chew you up and spit you out, and you'd lie there

[100] Ibid., 23.

[101] Ibid., 23-24.

[102] Ibid., 24.

> wondering what was wrong. Because you'd always expect the world to be something it wasn't, something it had no wish to be.[103]

Stoner, in the eyes of another, is seen "as a simple son of the soil" yes, but also as a man not cutout for the real world. The real world is for those who are actual knights and actual heroes – and Stoner, like Don Quixote, has read too many stories of chivalry and knighthood that he mistakes himself for one. Knights are those heroes who venture out into the world and slay dragons, however, as Master's explained earlier on, the university is not the real world. Rather, it is an asylum, a place for those not cut out for the real world, a protective institution for those, like Stoner. "cut out for failure." An asylum though it may be, it also stands as a sanctuary and protective force in Stoner's life in the same way that Boston was a protective entity in Will Andrews's life. When confronted just a few pages later with the option to receive a service exemption to continue teaching at the university instead of being shipped overseas to fight in WWI, he chooses to remain at the University of Missouri. However, not all significant battles are fought and won with guns and strategy. The fact, as established earlier in this chapter, that "everything matters" within the world of William Stoner remains, even those battles that seem inconsequential in comparison, and this fact is best explained by his professor and mentor Archer Sloane:

> You must remember what you are and what you have chosen to become, and the significance of what you are doing. There are wars and defeats and victories of the human race that are not military and that are not recorded in the annals of history. Remember that while you're trying to decide what to do.[104]

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[103] Ibid., 31.

[104] Ibid., 37.

The battles to which Sloane refers to are ones of the everyday man against the world, and that there is heroism to be found in overcoming these everyday battles in the same way that there heroism can be found in the victories of the allied forces over the central forces in WWI. For example, the everyday battle of William Stoner as he struggles to let his inner passion for literature and poetry shine forth in his classroom as a young teacher. This, as seen in the story of William Stoner's life, can take a lifetime to overcome.

Williams builds a sense of realism in the reader's mind through the portrayal of William Stoner's internal struggle. Stoner, as a character, seems like a fully-fledged person in the minds of readers because his internal struggles to express his inner turmoil, whether they concern war, death, or love, are the same internal struggles shared by the real flesh-and-blood readers whose mind he exists in as a character. In chapter three, we are told that Stoner, in preparation to write his dissertation on "The Influence of the Classical Tradition upon the Medieval Lyric", "spent much of the summer rereading the classical and medieval Latin poets, and especially their poems upon death. He wondered again at the easy, graceful manner in which the roman lyricists accepted the fact of death".[105] This sense of wonderment at death builds a sense of false interiority of character within the mind of the reader while he ponders stoically upon the practice of accepting the fact of death in an "easy" and "graceful" manner in the same way that one accepts the fact of time, as an "is" rather than as a "good" or "bad" aspect of life. This outlooks again harkens back to the central stoic tenant of concerning oneself with things which one can control, therefore leaving everything outside of one's control outside the

[105] Ibid., 41.

realm of worry. Stoner, here, embodies this outlook in admiration for these Roman and Stoic poets who viewed death with neither worry nor joy, but rather with a sense of ease and grace.

This stoic outlook, or worldview, works great when applied to things outside of one's control, like death, but what about romance and the life-lived before death, can you unpassionately reason your way into romance and love? Williams brings this question to light in his portrayal of Stoner's courtship of Edith, his soon-to-be wife.

Though Stoic ethics may be useful to the approach of academic work, Williams goes on to show how a detached and unpassionate approach to romance in pursuit of a wife, or any other romantic partner for that matter, might not be so ideal. Though there may be a time and a place for detachment and duty, romantic relationships are likely not one of them. Stoner's courtship of Edith, his wife, starts off dispassionately, and in the same way Stoner, at first, is unable to express the inner passion classical literature inspires in his soul, Stoner also fails to explain to Edith just how he feels about her romantically.

According to Elaine Showalter, mentioned earlier in the introduction as a feminist critic with valid concerns for the portrayal of Stoner's wife Edith within the novel: Edith is portrayed as a "neurotic harpy."[106] Showalter says that Williams's portrayal of Edith is rather unfair in that the motivations for her "inexplicable transformations"[107] are never expressed. She points out that Williams's literary agent Marie Rodell made a similar observation in 1963 when she noted that "Edith's motivations need amplification",

[106] Showalter, "Classic 'Stoner'? Not so Fast," ¶6.

[107] Ibid.

because, as a character, she seems to only exist to "torment her husband."[108] This one-sided portrayal, however, could be seen as a narrative move to show Stoner's one-sided view of his wife, in that he himself lacks any sort of understanding for her motivations, and tragically and ignorantly fails to ever ask her for one.

Such feminist criticisms, though valid, timely, poignant, and thoughtful, were not discussed or stated when *Stoner* was first published in 1965, and it wasn't until *Stoner* became commercially successful did such concerns about Williams's work start to circulate. Showalter, publishing *Faculty Towers* in 2005, which is a book that discusses novels about campus life and how those novels have had effects on the academe as such, avoids any mention of Williams or *Stoner*, likely because the NYRB re-publication of *Stoner* didn't happen until 2006. The introduction and conclusion to Showalter's popular article published in the *Washington Post* in response to the NYRB collectors' hardcover publication of *Stoner* only specifically takes issue with the fact that the book was being lauded and praised as perfect, which is certainly fair, especially given the fact that a "perfect" novel, in any objective sense, doesn't exist. One of the concerns that Coldiron, in contrast, raises is, if *Stoner* is being presented as the ideal masculine intellectual hero, and yet he is still engaging in inappropriate sexual relations with his wife, what does that say about our society as a whole when we elevate such literature into the realm of idealism and "perfection"?

Ultimately, in response to this, it wouldn't be unfair to say that, in contributing to the genre of historical realism, Williams isn't presenting an ideal character, and in fact is

[108] Ibid., ¶7.

interested in not just portraying Stoner's ideal stoic virtue, but also his realistic shortcomings and failures as a man to foster a meaningful and understanding relationship with his wife. Williams tells us that:

> He [Stoner] did not speak to Edith about her new behavior; her activities caused him only minor annoyance, and she seemed happy, though perhaps a bit desperately so. It was, finally, himself that he held responsible for the new direction her life had taken; he had been unable to discover for her any meaning in their life together, in their marriage. Thus it was right for her to take what meaning she could find in areas that had nothing to do with him and go ways he could not follow.

Here, Stoner's quiet passivity, though a virtue in other aspects of his life, becomes a deadly fault. His inability "to speak to Edith about her new behavior" to show interest in what she was doing, creates a barrier to understanding and connection that Stoner, perhaps unknowingly, wants and needs.

Both Coldiron and Showalter, in their respective articles, point out that Williams intended to portray Stoner as the ideal masculine, intellectual hero. Showalter says that Stoner is meant to be seen as an "exemplary scholar and an example of all that is noble in the academic profession". Coldiron uses the word "hagiographic" in her expression of the fact that Williams intended Stoner as a saintly academic hero. Showalter even refers to a letter Williams wrote to his literary agent, saying: "The point of the novel will be that he is a kind of saint.... It is a novel about a man who finds no meaning in the world or in himself, but he does find meaning and a kind of victory in the honest and dogged pursuit of his profession." Having gone through almost all of Williams's fiction, poetry, and essays, it is interesting to note his almost incessant use of the phrase "a kind of" in the above excerpt from the letter: "a kind of saint" and "a kind of victory".

He uses this phrase multiple times throughout *Stoner* as well: “a kind of wonder”, “a kind of lethargy descended”, “in a kind of frustrated joy”. Williams uses this phrase as a rhetorical move to reflect on the larger implications, themes, and tragedies of life and writing itself, which is that some things, maybe even most things, are unattainable and un-articulatable. There is a deep irony to the fact that a professor of literature, presumably someone who has gathered a rather large bag of language to express himself with, cannot find the words to express his passion to his students or to his wife. The phrase “a kind of” can be seen as a rhetorical tip-of-the-hat to the fact that some things can never be pinned down with words, and it is only the attempt that is tangible.

So, when Williams says that he sees Stoner as “a kind of saint” who finds “a kind of victory”, he is expressing the pursuit, rather than the actual attainment of such a goal. There is also the portion of this letter that mentions the fact that Stoner “finds no meaning in the world or in himself”, which is clearly a mistake, especially when the only meaning he finds is “in the honest and dogged pursuit of his profession.” This reflects on the fact that Stoner is not meant to be seen as an ideal character, or saint, but rather that he is realistically being portrayed as a fully-fledged individual with commendable aspects to his character along with damning ones as well. There is a call for discernment here where we recognize his redeemable qualities with regards to his professional life while rejecting his shortcomings in his personal and married life.

Although Edith can be seen as being a character that shows Stoner’s shortcomings in relation to the ideal stoic academic and masculine hero, she also stands as a critique for certain unrealistic portrayals of femininity, as Mark Asquith has astutely pointed out:

> Edith's doll-like appearance and behavior are designed to critique a particularly oppressive model of femininity: the Southern belle. Beautiful, privileged, selfish, kept in a state perpetual childishness, she is forced to learn a variety of useless accomplishments and educated in such a way that she has a confused attitude toward manners, men and sex.[109]

In the same way that Victorian novels portrayed women as ideally passive, inert, and doll-like just as women were starting to receive full legal enfranchisement, Williams shows Edith in a similar light, but one in which he is pointing out the misogyny at the heart of such idealistic portrayals.

As the narrative progresses, we see Stoner progress in the world of academia, becoming a full professor of English literature at the University of Missouri. As part of his duties as professor, he is asked to "be a member of the three-man committee who would examine"[110] a doctoral student by the name of Charles Walker. Walker is a student under the tutelage of Stoner's intellectual and personal rival, Hollis Lomax. Both Charles and Hollis are romantics and are interested in the study of the aesthetics and perception of beauty present in the Romantic poets, like Keats and Shelley, while Stoner is only interested in the literary facts concerning English literature. During Charles's oral examinations, he mentions that "Beauty is also knowledge" in relation to a few lines by Keats. Stoner, the archetypal traditionalist, interested in analyzing literature from the perspective of form and craftsmanship, finds himself pitted against a student and his mentor who insist on revelation, genius, and inspiration as the source of the mystery of literature.

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[109] Asquith, *Novels of John Williams*, 100.

[110] Williams, *Stoner*, 152.

During Walker's oral examinations, he expounds upon the genius and the truth found in the beauty of Shelley's inspired words and finds little else to present in relation to the structure of the poems themselves. Frustrated at the topic of conversation, Stoner changes the discussion by inquiring into whether Walker was able to describe "the principles of Anglo-Saxon versification?"[111] Walker then goes on to state the early Anglo-Saxon's were "primitive" in their versification, and that "there is potential" in its "subtlety of feeling." Stoner then repeats and insists that he asked for "principles", and not characterizations. In this interaction, the character of Stoner is presented as stubbornly principled as a traditionalist stoic in the face of romanticism and ethereal characterizations of literature.

As Williams narratively unfolds Stoner's life, we come to a point where Stoner meets middle age. His middle-aged years are met with the start of WWII, and as the war gets underway, the reader gets a rare peek at Stoner's emotions as we are told that his heart "recoiled" at the news of the "daily waste" that is characteristic of war. Stoners is horrified as he starts to see "the faculty depleted, he saw the classrooms emptied of their young men, he saw the haunted looks upon those who remained behind, and saw in those looks the slow death of the heart, the bitter attrition of feeling and care."[112] As Williams builds this character into his later years, we start to see him solidify his stoic aspects:

> The years of the war blurred together, and Stoner went through them as he might have gone through a driving and nearly unendurable storm, his head down, his jaw locked, his mind fixed upon the next step and the next and the next. Yet for all his stoical

[111] Ibid., 157.

[112] Ibid., 245.

> endurance and his stolid movement through the days and weeks, he was an intensely divided man.[113]

Here, the reader to perceives that Stoner's masculinity and heroism do not stem from his physical strength or power, but rather from his capacity to endure. Stoner can keep driving forward despite the hurricane force winds of life pushing back on him, and he retains this archetypal endurance to the bitter end, even as he is slowly passing away from cancer. Williams concludes this character's life, and the narrative that it inhabited, by stating that "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." A sense of certainty of self is what we are left with to round-out the construction of this archetypal, yet humanly flawed, portrayal of ancient stoicism.

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Moving away from a discussion of the narrative within *Stoner*, it would be of personal interest to briefly discuss *Stoner* as a physical book and artifact in the commercial space. *Stoner* is somewhat of a literary anomaly in that it only achieved serious commercial success decades after its initial publication. Normally, as you can imagine, it is the other way around; books sell well when they are first published, and then sales taper off as it stops being discussed in popular literary forums and circles. *Stoner* had quite the odd and unique resurrection. "The Williams revival," as Prendergast calls it, is worth discussing for two reasons. First, it is rare to see works of art that were initially ignored experience such a resurgence later in their life, although it has happened

[113] Ibid.

before. Second, it is worth contemplating — why was the reading public of the 1960s seemingly so uninterested in his work at the time? — and what has changed in the collective conscious of the reading public today, and in the last 10 years, that has caused them to be so interested in his work now? Williams was quite conscious at the time of *Stoner's* initial publication that it was unlikely to be a best seller.[114] However, he did believe that if the book was "handled right" by the publisher, that it could have a "respectable sale"[115] at the very least.

Frances Macmillan, an editor at Vintage paperbacks, speculates that *Stoner* wasn't initially successful when first published because, "in the cultural climate of the 1960s, it offered the opposite of sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll. It's about a [university] professor that the kids look at and say, 'we don't want to be like that'"[116]. Not wanting to be like Professor Stoner in the 60s was quite common amongst the youthful reading public at the time. University professors, especially English professors interested in Latin lyrical poetry during the English medieval era, were seen as 'part of the establishment'; and being a quiet and passive member of that establishment was antithetical to the cultural revolution going on at the time.

Michael Mewshaw, reviewing *Stoner* in *The South-Central Review* agrees with Macmillan in that there was a reason *Stoner* wasn't commercially successful when it was first published. It was out-of-step with its time and the reading public of the 1960s didn't

[114] Shields, *The Man who Wrote the Perfect Novel*, 150.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*, 2.

want a realistic view into the inner life of an obscure university professor. The reading public of the 1960s were much more interested in darkly comedic and satirical anti-war novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which was quite successful commercially when it first hit the shelves. The reading public of the time were also quite interested in postmodernist works of fiction, like John Barth's *Chimera*, which shared the 1973 National Book Award with Williams's *Augustus*.

Mewshaw, while criticizing *Stoner* for being a book out of touch with its time, in the same stroke of the pen, praises the book for employing the mystical and magical ability of literature to reanimate the dead. This metaphorical literary resurrection, for Mewshaw, is composed beautifully by Williams when he portrays Helen and Paris dancing together in the dark corner of William Stoner's attic-bedroom while in studious pursuit of his doctoral degree.[117]

Now that we have established potential reasons as to why a book like *Stoner* was mostly ignored when first published, the question remains — what has changed in the minds of contemporary readers that has caused this strange modern resurgence? One potential answer could come from across the Atlantic in France, with French novelist Anna Gavalda. In the documentary *The Act of Becoming*, which details the peculiar *Stoner* revival, Miss Gavalda discusses how — despite stating that her French translation would be "its own creation, a book in its own right" due to her belief that "to translate is to betray" — she was able to capture the themes present in *Stoner* which would resonate

[117] Michael Mewshaw, "John Williams and *Stoner*," *South Central Review* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 17-20.

with the French and European reading public. Miss Gavalda fell in love with *Stoner* while reading it in its original English and felt sure that her audience would feel the same way she did after reading it if they could access it in their own native tongue. So, she set about translating, and since her own novels seem to do so well in France, when she gave it her 'stamp of approval' through translation, *Stoner* became quite the commercial hit with French readers.

Edwin Frank, director of the *New York Review of Books*, notes that the themes of loneliness and existentialist realism present in *Stoner* are the same themes found in the works of Camus and Sartre: "It [*Stoner*] has that long-shadowed, lonely feeling. Loneliness is a big part of twentieth-century fiction. You might put *Stoner* in the company of *The Plague, The Stranger* and other enduring, existentialist books of that era."[118] I believe that if one were to do a textual and thematic comparative analysis between the works of Williams and the works of Sartre and Camus, one would find them much in the same vein; especially since loneliness is undeniably quite palpable and permeates throughout all three of Williams's major novels, especially *Stoner*.

With the *Stoner* phenomenon and the posthumous renaissance Williams's work has enjoyed as of late, which the French reading public had a hand in instigating, Clark notes that the acclaim for *Stoner* is unique in that it mostly spread via word-of-mouth. The publishers themselves admitted that they "could not quite understand"[119] why this obscure American novel from the 60s was developing such a cult following.

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[118] Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*, 3.

[119] Maureen Clark, "Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams' *Stoner*," 1.

## Chapter Three: *Augustus*

In *Augustus,* Williams shows how a young Octavius Caesar struggles against the power of Rome to see his uncle Julius's last will and testament fulfilled, which named the titular character heir to his title and position as emperor of Rome. Of course, being so young as he was at the time, the Roman Senate didn't want the fate of their empire in the hands of someone so inexperienced in war and politics (which went hand-in-hand at the time). Yet after a series of political maneuvers and military conflicts captained by young Octavius Caesar, he achieves his goal of seeing his Uncle Julius's final wishes fulfilled. However, even with the Senatorial decree of his divinity (his uncle Julius was similarly declared divine), assigning him a god-like status in the eyes of the Senate and Roman society, he is helpless to prevent his own daughter Julia from being banished from the empire and having her Roman citizenship revoked.

Julia, Augustus's daughter, had a romantic relationship with a proven conspirator to assassinate the emperor and was therefore considered one of the potential assassinators herself. The personal and the political seem to be of central importance in terms of an underlying theme for this narrative presented in epistolary form. Williams, ever concerned with the problem and question of permanent identity, found it deeply fascinating that, "despite being the emperor of the Western world, he couldn't force his daughter Julia to obey him.... Williams thought about the human dimension of the conflict: on the throne Augustus was emperor; in his own home, he was a father with a

difficult daughter, and the ramifications shook the known world."[120] Williams articulates this self-same idea which was the impetus for the novel in *Augustus* during a letter from Phaedrus, a tutor in the Octavian house, who states in an ironic sense of foreshadowing, of which the reader is already privileged to the knowledge of Julia's banishment, that:

> Were I so foolish to think that you might be pleased by flattery, I should pretend no surprise and affect some such nonsense as expecting so much from the daughter of the son of a god, Emperor of all the world, and so forth. But we both know that her character is her own, and that it is a strong one.[121]

Julia, from an early age and like her father, possess a strong will of her own. Within the world of the narrative, the reader intuits that this strong sense of will is hereditary, but Williams here seems to be complicating the assumption that power in the geopolitical sphere equates to power within the personal sphere. Clearly, in the case of Augustus and Julia, these two forms of power are derived one from the other.

As we discussed in the introduction section, there is good reason to believe that Williams was well-aware that Octavius Caesar, the historical man as well as his literary invention, was a practitioner in the stoic philosophical tradition. According to the historian of philosophy Georgia Mouroutsou, it is understood that, historically, famous Roman Stoics Posidonious and Panaetius were highly influential public intellectuals during their life and maintained social popularity under the reign of Augustus. Similarly, Athenodorus of Tarsus and Arius Didymus, both Stoic philosophers, served as moral

[120] Shields, *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel*, 151-52.

[121] Williams, *Augustus*, 162.

advisors under the aegis of Augustus. Seneca, the famous Stoic, was an advisor to Nero, and Cicero was a Senator during the reign of Julius Caesar.[122]

John Plotz, editor of *B-Side Books: Essays on Forgotten Favorites* provides an essay himself on *Butcher's Crossing* in which he briefly offers some rare insights into Williams's third novel, *Augustus* (mostly ignored by the academic community in comparison to *Stoner* and *Butcher's Crossing*) by pointing out that, as opposed to most historical novels that cover the big battles and politically controversial moments of history, "offers a very touching portrait of ancient Stoicism, a doomed but admirable effort to preserve one's private dignity in the face of public horror."[123]

Given that this thesis surrounds itself in questions of heroic masculinity, stoic adherence to a goal, and historical realism, it is worth questioning the historical reality of Octavius's genuine historical relationship with his uncle Julius, especially given that Williams shows Octavius as being extremely loyal to his uncle and to the empire his uncle built. Luciano Canfora, a historian of Julius Caesar, calls this very question to attention by showing why there is reason to doubt this assertion within the historical record. Canfora argues that Nicolaus of Damascus, author of Octavius's biography, was a "historical mythmaker" and that the "close-ness" of Julius and Augustus is a falsity of history. Williams's work suggests that Octavius's mother, Attia, was Julius's sister, but in actuality it would seem that Attia was Julius's niece, and that it was Attia's father who

[122] Georgia Mouroutso, "Moral Philosophy in the Imperial Roman Stoa," in *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy,* ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[123] Plotz, "*Butcher's Crossing*: John Williams," 228.

married Julius's sister. This would seem to suggest that the direct line of kinship between Julius and Augustus is farther off than Williams's novel — and certain other historical records — would like to portray.[124] These complications and discrepancies call into question the relationship that historical fiction has to the actual historical record. Williams himself provides sound guidance to the discrepancy apparent between historical fiction and historical record in his author's note to *Augustus* by pointing out that "It is recorded that a famous Latin historian declared he would have made Pompey win the battle of Pharsalia had the effective turn of a sentence required it."[125] Despite this seeming inaccuracy in the relationship between Augustus and Julius, it is worth reasserting that Williams never initially set out to re-tell the life-story of Augustus Caesar in a literal sense. In Williams's author's note, which immediately precedes the prologue to *Augustus*, he reminds his readers that "if there are truths in this work, they are the truths of fiction rather than of history. I shall be grateful to those readers who will take it [*Augustus*] as it is intended — a work of the imagination."[126] One can then deduce from this phrase that character portrayal of real historical people such as Octavius Caesar (aka Augustus Caesar) and his daughter Julia isn't necessarily who they actually were as real flesh-and-blood people in history, but rather their individual temperaments are literary and serve a literary purpose in order to establish a "truth of fiction" rather than a truth of

[124] Luciano Canfora, "The Shoot of a Palm Tree: The Young Octavius Caesar Emerges," in *Julius Caesar: The People's Dictator*, ed. Marian Hill and Kevin Windle, 245-55, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[125] John Williams, "Author's Note" In *Augustus* (New York: NYRB).

[126] Ibid.

history. The historical accuracy of the setting surrounding Williams's characters does not itself provide the realism present in his novels, rather it is the portrayal of the characters themselves that embodies this realism.

However, there is some historical accuracy present in *Augustus* when accounting for Octavius's rise to power in the early parts of his novel. Everything from letters from his mother and stepfather urging him to denounce the throne as heir, to receiving word of Caesar's assassination in Apolonia during a military campaign, seems historically accurate by referencing Mark Toher's historical account as described in his article "Octavian's Arrival in Rome, 44b.c." published in *Classical Quarterly*. This article also alludes to the question of, and then sheds light on, the question of the historical character of Octavius versus the actual historical man. Octavius, in some historical accounts, is presented as cold and calculating, while others present him as sensitive and humane to his subjects. If both historical accounts are considered "reliable", which account is meant to be regarded as "the truth"? It is reasonable to assume that both, in fact, are true in some way.

Given that Octavius, like the rest of us, was a complex and multifaceted person, he can be both of these things at different stages and moments of his life when the occasion demands. Toher, furthering his question of which documents can be relied upon to derive historical truth from, and therefore be considered "valid", questions the objectiveness of some of the documents that Williams relied on to make *Augustus* seem as genuinely close and accurate to the historical record such as it was at the time of his writing. For example, the biography of Augusts, written by Nicolaus of Damascus, form which Williams drew

historical information from, is considered by many historians to simply be Augustin propaganda. This propaganda was meant to, after-the-fact, promote and legitimize his rule.

This one-sided account is therefore of questionable use as a valid historical document. However, if some of the claims therein can be corroborated from other historical accounts, would that not add validity to such a document, whether it was written as a propaganda piece or not? This biography portrays Octavius as naïve, innocent, yet passionate in the face of experienced and powerful enemies who only sought to fill the power vacuum left by Julius's assassination with their own dictatorship. This young, naïve, and innocent portrayal is the same one we get in Williams's novel. However, in opposition to this portrayal, classical historians, like Syme, characterize Octavius as an amoral leader who was driven by ambition for power and directed by a cold and detached, yet intelligent calculation for self-preservation.

With this wide discrepancy in differing historical portrayal of the real Octavius, Toher concludes that the answer, as usual, lies somewhere in the middle, that Octavius Caesar, as a youth was really quite impetuous who trusted to boldness and rash decision-making in his early days, while becoming more reserved, considerate, and stoical in his later years.[127]

In the same way Williams offers a subtle critique of market forces in *Butcher's Crossing*, he also subtlety comments on the unreliability of certain, individual historic

[127] Mark Toher, "Octavian's Arrival in Rome, 44 b.c." *Classical Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2004): 174-84.

records for accurate information. Williams plays with the notion that different people often take differing account of the same person and events. For example, on the same page, Williams presents a letter from Cicero to Brutus and a letter from Marc Antony to Gaius Tavus (military commander of Macedonia). In the first brief letter from Cicero, he notes that "He [Octavius] praises Caesar in the gentlest of terms, and lets it be known that he takes the inheritance out of duty and the name out of reverence, and that he intends to retire to private life once he has done with the matter at hand."[128] While in the letter from Marc Antony, the author states that "He [Octavius] has been in Rome for the past week or so, acting like a bereaved widow, calling himself Caesar, all manner of nonsense."[129] What is the reader supposed to make of these radically different accounts? Williams, here, is showing how politics, and the need to portray someone in a certain light, can influence the historical record, leaving it hard to discern the facts of the matter. In this sense, then, there really is truth in fiction and fiction in the "truth" of historical record.

Revisiting the methodologies previously employed in the introduction of this thesis, it is valuable to reference once more the preface to Steedman's *Dust* to emphasize the challenge of relying solely on historical records for historical accuracy and to enhance the historicity in connection with historical realism. The historical record, especially in the case of *The Life of Augustus*, written by Nicolaus of Damascus, a member of the Octavian house, cannot be fully relied upon as historical truth due to the political and propagandistic nature of it's composition. Novels like *Augustus* then, in a pedagogical

[128] Williams, *Augustus*, 33.

[129] Ibid.

sense, offer more than just a philosophical education concerning stoicism, it also offers a legitimate view into history through the interaction of characters both fictional and historical. In the same way that *Middlemarch* can be used to peer into the world of 19th century provincial England, *Augustus* can arguably be used to peer into the life and times of Octavius Caesar at the height of the Pax Romana and the Roman Empire itself. As Steedman points out:

> The Archive in which Dust is found and with which this book also deals, is a particular kind of archive, instituted by state (or quasi-state) organizations since the late eighteenth century, in England and France. These are the archives used by social and cultural historians like myself, and a small and parochial example of a longer and larger collection of the documents of world history, by churches and temples, schools and colleges, monarchs, princes and other kinds of absolutist ruler, and departments of government, within and without Europe, long before the eighteenth century.

In an attempt to legitimize power and the historical narrative of a nation, Steedman assert that the historical archive itself cannot be solely relied upon for a complete historical account. So, in the same way that Elliot's *Middlemarch* "is a historical study of Coventry and Warwickshire in the late 1820s and early 1830s" in which the author "wrote in the wake of the Second Reform Act of 1867"[130] we can speak of *Augustus* as being a study of the Roman Empire from 13 B.C. to 14 A. D. in which the author wrote in the wake of the Vietnam war as a commentary on the expansion of nationhood and empire in the contemporary world.

Referring back to the narrative itself, the narratological form and arc of *Augustus* is clearly different from *Stoner* and *Butcher's Crossing*. For one, both *Stoner* and *Augustus*,

[130] Steedman, *Dust*, 90.

with respect to time, both proceed from one logical starting point in time and progress to another after. *Butcher's Crossing* is a snapshot of a journey in a young man's life that start at point A and ends at B. Similarly, aside from the first paragraph, *Stoner* starts from his childhood and ends with his death in old age. However, *Augustus* jumps around in time, going between memoirs of experiences past to letters addressing what is happening within the narrative as it unfolds, to alluding to events that have yet to take place within the normal flow of time. Each letter or memoir within the novel includes who the author is, who it is addressed to, and when it was written. Chronologically, the letters do not follow any specific timeline. Both of Williams's first two novels are told by an unnamed narrator, detached from the plot-structure, who has intimate knowledge of the inner-thoughts of the main characters. In contrast, *Augustus* is written as a collection of epistles and memoires, meant to give the reader the illusion of trapsing through the historical record to find out more about the historical character of Augustus Caesar and the role he played in history. Of course, these letters themselves are works of fiction, but the fact that most of the novel marks itself off as being written by one real historical figure and addressed to another provides a sort of voyeuristic experience to the reader who instinctively knows that they aren't necessarily the intended recipient of these words. Williams, then, in the same way that we get a glimpse into how William Stoner was perceived through the eyes of Dave Masters earlier, must build the character of Augustus almost entirely through the words of other characters in this world (book three of *Augustus* is entirely given to Octavius — it consists of a very long letter by Octavius

addressed to Nicolaus of Damascus who composed Augustus Caesar's biography *Life of Augustus*).

One of the first moments of character building we get comes from Maecenas to Livy. The author is recounting his memories of his first encounter with Augustus to assist Livy in his recounting of the history of Rome. Maecenas states that:

> I thought him a pleasant stripling, no more, with a face too delicate to receive the blows of fate, with a manner too diffident to achieve purpose, and with a voice too gentle to utter the ruthless words that a leader of men must utter. I thought that he might become a scholar of leisure, or a man of letter; I did not think that he had the energy to become even a senator, to which his name and wealth entitled him.[131]

The language here used to describe Octavius is reminiscent of the portrayal of William Stoner: "diffident", "gentle", and "delicate". He lacks the necessary energy to attain and hold political power, implying that his meekness will have to eradicated if he ever hopes to become the emperor he is destined to become. His timidity seems more suited, like Stoner, "to become a scholar of leisure", and not the military leader of a great empire.

The next letter the reader is provided with in the sequence of letters that make up this book is from Julius Caesar to Octavius himself. In contrast to Caesar's own self-professed volatile temperament, he reminds Octavius of the impressive calm he saw that he retained in battle, and that "a great burden was lifted from [his] shoulders" when he saw how Octavius reacted during a life-or-death military conflict:

> In my anger at what seemed certain defeat, I ordered you to return to Rome, whence you had traveled in what seemed to me then such ease and comfort; and said that I could not bother with a boy who wanted to play at war and death. I was angry only at

[131] Williams, *Augustus*, 15.

> myself, as I am sure you knew even then; for you did not speak, but looked at me out of a great calm.[132]

Williams, writing through the character of Julius Caesar, is showing Octavius as a character who accepts the situation for what it is, and does not argue with the facts of any given situation, but rather deals with them with a stoic calm as they come. In the letter, Caesar reminds Octavius that his response at hearing about "certain defeat" was "we are not fighting for victory; we are fighting for our lives". Caesar, at the end of the letter, depicted quite stoically himself by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*, reminds Octavius, quite stoically, that "things will be as they will be."[133]

The next bit of text Williams provides the reader with to make up the novel is an excerpt from the Journal of Salvidienus Rufus, written in 44 b.c., the year Julius Caesar was assassinated. This portion of his journal recounts the moment when Augustus received news, via letter, of Caesar's death:

> It is a letter. Octavius takes it and holds it and does not move for several moments…. Slowly he unrolls the letter; he reads; there is no expression on his face. Still he does not speak. After a long while he raises his head and turns to us. His face is like white marble. He puts the letter in my hand; I do not look at it. He says in a dull, flat voice: "My uncle is dead."[134]

Even when presented with the news of his uncle's death, he is portrayed as expressionless, silent, and communicates "in a dull, flat voice" indicating a contemplative, rather than reactionary, demeaner in the face of world-changing news.

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[132] Ibid., 17.

[133] Ibid., 19.

[134] Ibid., 22.

When he does finally speak and respond to this news, he states "We will talk later. Now I must think of what this will mean." Indicating his contemplative nature, Williams also portrays the level of discernment befitting a stoic emperor in Rufus's journal as he recounts that, speaking softly, Octavius states "My uncle once told me that too much caution may lead to death as certainly as too much rashness."[135] The reader, in the hands of Williams, gets the sense here that stoic discernment is one of the pillars on which this character is being propped up, the wisdom of the middle way is one of the characteristics Octavius is portrayed as possessing.

In the same way that Williams uses Stoner's father to tell us more about the main character of that book, and he is structured in the mind of his readers, he also uses Augustus's daughter Julia to the same end. As part of the many different documents that make up this novel, one of them is the journal that she keeps while in exile on the island of Pandateria. She records emphatically that:

> I am Julia, daughter of Octavius Caesar, the August; and I write these words in the forty-third year of my life… I would not explain myself to the world, and I would not have the world understand me; I have become indifferent to us both. For however long I may live in this body, which I have served with much care and art for so many years, that part of my life which matters is over; thus I may view it with a detached interest of the scholar that Athenodorus once said I might have become, had I been born a man and not the daughter of an Emperor and god.[136]

Under the tutelage of her father and the stoic philosopher Athenodorus, advisor to Augustus himself, Julia recalls that she was taught by both to view herself "with a detached interest". Reflecting her father's ability to view things objectively, she doesn't

[135] Ibid., 23.

[136] Ibid., 146.

feel the need to explain herself to the world, but rather to write objectively for herself, so she may recall her own experiences.

As the narrative progresses, and we see Octavius become Augustus Caesar, emperor of Rome, Williams continues to portray him as the simple and contemplative man who never allowed the Senatorial decree of his divinity to go to his head. In a letter from his mistress Terntia while he is campaigning in Asia, she articulates her frustration at the absence of her lover. However, in these complaints, she reminds herself of something Octavius once mentioned to her, "I know that you have told me that rage against necessity is the rage of a child."[137] Again, here we have another display of a stoic platitude that the character of Augustus is being constructed around.

The novel ends with a long letter by Octavius himself to Nicolaus of Damascus in which old age has made it necessary that the great Augustus Caesar himself account for the life he has lived. He does so by writing to an old friend and advisor who recognizes him for the man that he is, unlike the rest of Rome who worship him as a deity.

A few pages into this letter, Octavius recalls with admiration how the old stoic Cicero, like his mentor Socrates before him "offered his neck to his executioner with that same grace."[138] Here, Augustus acknowledges, from one stoic to another, their tenet that "Death is nothing to us: for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us. "[139] Augustus then goes on to state in his letter that, "I

[137] Ibid., 189.

[138] Ibid., 273.

[139] Oates, *Stoic Philosophers*, 35.

believe that I was then even more nearly indifferent to the fact of my existence than I am now"[140] which appears quite similar to Marcus Aurelius' notion that "I consist of a little body and a soul. Now to this little body all things are indifferent, for it is not able to perceive differences."[141]

We can see here how Williams is using Stoic aphorisms to structure his fictional version of Augustus around stoic aphorisms. However, rather than doing so through the words of other characters, Williams concludes his book with the characters own understanding of himself and his actions.

The novel closes with a letter from Octavius's doctor, Philippus — who attended the emperor until his last days — to Seneca, similarly a practitioner of stoic philosophy who, from context found within the letter, has asked Philippus to recall for the sake of history what the last days of Augustus were like. Phillippus recalls that Octavius was fond of him, "in that curious detached way that he seemed to have."[142] From a rhetorical standpoint, this is the last adjective we get describing August's character, and it is centered around the notion of stoic detachment. From these examples, we can see how the Williams's Augustus was rhetorically structured and built around notions of stoic philosophy.

If *Augustus* provides readers an insightful portrait into the ideals of ancient Stoicism as Octavius might have lived them in his time, *Stoner* offers a similar portrait into stoic

[140] Williams, *Augustus*, 275.

[141] Oates, *Stoic Philosophers*, 530.

[142] Williams, *Augustus*, 302.

philosophy as it might be ideally employed in a contemporary academic setting. Multiple critics have noted *Stoner's* ability to proffer an ethical aesthetic worth contemplating. This ethical aesthetic, as stated by Williams himself, is Stoic in nature. Abdeni-Holman points out that, apart from the ethics of the main character himself, the readers are meant to see that life — especially the lives of others — is not meant to be value-judged, but rather the point of reading *Stoner* is to experience and understand the innerworkings of someone else's mind[143]. While Abdeni-Holman is using *Stoner* to philosophize about the ethics of how we come to understand the lives of others, Frank is using *Stoner* to philosophize in a more pragmatic way with regards to pedagogical practice. Writing in the journal of *Ethics and Education*, Frank wants to bring *Stoner* to the attention of "philosophers of education" because he believes it has "a great deal to teach us about what living teaching looks like."[144]

Apart from this ethical view of how readers ought to experience the life of others, there is a second pedagogical theme in the realm of ethics that Wrethed and Frank are each pointing to. Both would agree that in relation to the teaching of pedagogical ethics, *narratives*, and not "reports and jeremiads on teaching"[145] is the best way to "see how events take place" within the world of teaching.[146] Both academics would seem to agree

[143] Emily Abdeni-Holman, ""Life" in John Williams's *Stoner*," *Philosophy and Literature* 45, no. 1 (April 2021): 154.

[144] Jeff Franks, "Love and Work: A Reading of John Williams's *Stoner*," *Ethics and Education* 12, no. 2 (2017): 234.

[145] Ibid., 240.

[146] Joakim Wrethed, "John Williams' *Stoner* and Literature as Dark Matter in the age of Educational Managerialism," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 25, no. 1 (2019): 151.

that literature offers a "vitalizing component"[147] to students, and that teachers of literature, like William Stoner, have a responsibility to share and proffer this vitalizing component in their classroom with as much enthusiasm as they can muster. Wrethed also seems to align with Abdeni-Holman in his understanding of *Stoner* as a work of art that deals with the aesthetics of a virtuous life. Abdeni-Holman is reading *Stoner* in a way that conceptualizes "what it is to live and what makes for a good life"[148] while Wrethed sees William Stoner's "seemingly empty life as an aesthetic will to power"[149] which is a "will to power" that seems to make a genuine attempt at attaining virtue and grace; and it is this attempt at 'virtue and grace' that is of the upmost importance to both Abdeni-Holman, Wretehd, and John Williams himself.

Questions concerning the pedagogy of ethics can be cultivated through literary experience. Jan Grue asserts, through a discussion of *Stoner* in *Fictional Worlds and the Moral Imagination*, that narrative drama as such is the playground for moral, ethical, and philosophical reflection and inquiry. Grue provides a reading of *Stoner* that focuses on how the titular character embodies an ethical ideal. The specific word Grue uses to articulate this idea is "apotheosis", through which she is attempting to state that William Stoner embodies a picture of the ideal pedagogue worth aiming at. This idealism is only being levied at his professional pursuits, which implies, in agreement with Coldiron and Showalter, that the stoic portrayal Williams makes of Stoner's personal life is one that

[147] Ibid., 159.

[148] Abdeni-Holman, ""Life" in John Williams' *Stoner*," 138.

[149] Wrethed, "John Williams' *Stoner* and Literature as Dark Matter," 153-154.

displays it as lacking and wanting. There is a loyalty to William Stoner's work that is unmatched in other places of his life, which is a very realistic portrayal of a multifaceted character. Take Stoner's marriage, for example, the actuality of his embodied ideal, as is true for all of us, falls short in a realistic way in his personal life. Overall, Grue is pointing out that the striving towards an ideal moral aesthetic is what's ultimately important as opposed to the actual attainment of such an ideal.[150]

Relating *Augustus* to Williams's first two novels, we can see that they differ not just in form — epistolary versus extra-homodiegetic — but in content as well. As might be expected from a historically realistic portrayal of a Roman emperor, Octavius is seen as very concerned with the nationhood of Rome and Roman-ness as a cultural phenomenon. However, echoing Benedict Anderson's finding that "Nation, nationality, nationalism — all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze"[151] we see that neither Williams, nor the characters that make up *Augustus*, ever fall on a definition or set of qualifications of what it means to be Roman. Because of this elusory sense of Roman-ness pervasive throughout the book, we can say *Augustus* is concerned with nationality, statehood, and empire in a much more profound and essential way than can be said about *Butcher's Crossing* or *Stoner*. In chapter two of book two of *Augustus*, Octavius Caesar get a letter form Athenodorus — stoic philosopher, advisor to Octavius, and tutor to Julia

[150] Jan Grue, "'A Kind of Purity': Inanimacy, Disability, and Posthumanist Prefigurations in John Williams' *Stoner*," in *Fictional Worlds and the Moral Imagination*, ed. Gary L. Hagberg (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 175-98.

[151] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.

(Octavius's daughter) — who applauds Octavius's decision to set up a system of Roman schools in their newly conquered Gallic regions:

> You are quite right; if the people there are to become a part of Rome, they must have the Roman tongue, whereby they may know that history and that culture in which they are to thrive. I would to the gods that the fashionable riffraff here in Rome, some of whom you are pleased to call your friends, had so much concern for the education of their own children as you have for your subjects in distant lands. It may be that those in other lands shall become more Roman than we who remain in the heart of our country.[152]

Given that Williams was writing at the height of the Vietnam war, and the clash between two modern "Roman Empires" — the US and the Soviet Union — threatened to tear the world in two, it isn't that surprising that this articulation of the idea that nationality and statehood can be exported by the conquering culture and adopted by the subjugated culture. This is the idea, for better or for worse, at the heart of the endeavors of imperialism and colonialism — that a sense of nationalism and nationhood can be taught and adopted. Yet the question remains, besides a working knowledge of the Latin language, what else does it mean to be Roman? That was the whole point here of Octavius's implementation of these Roman schools, to teach "Roman tongue", "history", and "culture in which they are to thrive." Athenodorus says that the Gallic people, through proper education, can "become a part of Rome," which implicitly rejects the idea that nationality is intrinsically related to one's place of birth. It would seem, from this excerpt, that with the proper education and "the Roman tongue" anyone can become Roman. There is also a sense here that there are levels to Roman-ness, that one can

[152] Williams, *Augustus*, 163.

become increasingly "more Roman," even more so than the native-born Romans residing on the Italian peninsula.

Williams's dedication to Renaissance drama and poetry as an academic is evident through, not only his publication of an anthology of English renaissance verse, which showcases his knowledge of cultural aspects of early modern England, but also through his engagement with character in a historical context. By embedding his understanding of Tacitean historiography in his narratives, Williams enhances his ability to portray historically realistic fiction. He is particularly interested in creating stories that feature characters deeply entrenched in historical contexts and believes that these stories must be driven by strong, yet deeply flawed characters as influenced by the Tacitean tradition. The Tacitean tradition emphasizes not just the history of Rome itself, but places special emphasis on the historical characters within those narratives. This is the tradition taken up in early modern England by the likes of Shakespeare and Ben Johnson who emphasize the centrality of character within their narratives over concerns of ideology or politics. Williams the academic would be most familiar with the tradition as adopted by the Renaissance humanists of the early-modern period in England. Similarly, Plutarch was another classical writer who emphasized the centrality of character within his historical writings, which also inspired plays like Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In this characterological analysis, we have seen how Williams has constructed his three main characters in each of his three main novels around the tenets of Stoic and Emersonian transcendental philosophies, respectively. His characters, structured around

these tenets, display and critique pre-conceived notions of heroic masculinity in a way that calls the reader to discern the positives and negatives of each school of thought for themselves. The objective of this thesis was to foreground the language Williams is using in the construction of his characters in order to show how they exist within the mind of the reader.

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