

Williams' Stoner

Guilt, Shakespeare, Sisyphus, and the Non-Thriving Survivor

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If you haven't read this book that was recently republished by The New York Review of Books, here's why you might want to take a look.

"... rarer than a great novel-it [Stoner] is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, that it takes your breath away."

—Morris Dickstein¹

Survival is the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances. Failure to thrive, a term used in medicine to refer to unexplained weight loss, malnutrition, and disability, refers here to the inability to self-actualize, fulfill one's potentials, and flourish from a psychological perspective.

John Edward Williams (1922 — 1994) was an editor, professor, and author, best known for his novels *Augustus* (which won a US National Book Award) and *Stoner*.² Its protagonist, William Stoner, is an unusually bright, sensitive, highly endowed human being. He manages to survive a miserable marriage, a painful extramarital affair, the relationship with his alienated daughter, a stalled career in academia, and geographic and emotional separation from his parents, yet he is unable to fulfill his unusual potential. This essay explores the reason-guilt-that Stoner was able to survive but failed to thrive.

A pivotal moment in the protagonist's life: Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73"

The pivotal moment in William Stoner's life occurs during his sophomore year of college when, in a literature survey course, his professor reads Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73,"³ considered by Shakespeare scholar John Berryman⁴ "one of the best poems in English."

Sonnet 73

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 ruin'd choirs, where late the ; sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of ; such day

¹ Dickstein M. The inner lives of men. Sunday Book Review. *New York Times*. June 17, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/books/review/Dickstein-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Accessed October 15, 2013.

² Williams J. *Stoner*. New York: New York Review of Books; 1965.

³ Shakespeare Online. Sonnet 73. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/73.html>. Accessed October 15, 2013.

⁴ Berryman J. In: Haffenden J, ed. *Berryman's Shakespeare*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1999.

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 see'st the glowing of ; such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth ; doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must ; expire
Consumed with that which it was ; nourish'd by.
This thou perceivest, which; makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must ; leave ere long.

The professor asks the class what the sonnet means, calling on several students, but gets no answers. Finally, he calls on Stoner. "Mr Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner. Do you hear him ... What does he say?" Stoner begins, "It means ..." but he cannot finish. He tries again and then falls into silence.

Literary critic Mel Livatino⁵ writes:

That day in Sloan's classroom is pivotal. As a boy and young man, Stoner had never before considered what something meant, including his own life. He had taken the land, his lessons, his chores, even his life, merely as blunt facts of existence, and stood dumb before them. The bewilderment he feels that day in the classroom leads him to switch his major to English.

Stoner had expected to study agriculture when he entered college but was overwhelmed with the sonnet. Its speaker is an older man, like Stoner's aging father, who asks a younger man to be aware that his days are coming to an end: "In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire/That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,/As the death-bed whereon it must expire/Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by."

The closing couplet of the sonnet admonishes that the younger man's love should grow stronger since the speaker's time is running out. The sonnet has a powerful esthetic impact on Stoner at the same time that it engenders feelings of guilt in him, and he decides to pursue literature, not agronomy, and teach at the university-not return to his parent's farm.

"Sonnet 73" contains many of the themes to Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, including the ravages of time on one's physical well-being and the mental anguish associated with moving further from youth and closer to death.

The speaker invokes a series of metaphors to characterize the nature of what he perceives is his old age. In the first quatrain, he compares his time of life to the late autumn, when the leaves have almost completely fallen from the trees, the weather has grown cold, and the birds have left their branches.

⁵ Livatino M. "Revaluation: A Sadness Unto the Bone: John Williams's Stoner." *Sewanee Rev.* 2010;118:417-422.

In the second quatrain, the metaphor shifts to that of twilight, with the remaining light slowly extinguished in the darkness, which the speaker likens to “Death’s second self.”

In the third quatrain, the speaker compares himself to the glowing remnants of a fire that lies “on the ashes of his youth”—that is, on the ashes of the logs that once enabled it to burn—and that will soon be consumed by “that which it was nourish’d by”—that is, it will be extinguished as it sinks into the ashes, which its own burning created. By dropping from a year, to a day, to the brief duration of a fire, Shakespeare shows the increasing momentum of time’s passage as one ages.

In the couplet, the speaker tells his loved one that he must perceive these things and his love must be strengthened by the knowledge that he will soon be parted from the speaker when, like the fire, he is extinguished by time. This sonnet is congruent with the Buddhist concept that the nature of love is confluent with the awareness of life’s impermanence.

Stoner and Sisyphus

It is unclear why the author chose “Stoner” for the name of his protagonist and the title of the book. None of the dictionary’s definitions for “stoner” are particularly relevant to the novel: an attacker who pelts the victim with stones (especially with intent to kill); one who walls with stones; (informal) one who is habitually intoxicated by alcohol or dope; and a person who is a delinquent or a failure. Stoner is not a “pothead”; if he attacks (and it is rare that he does), it is more with the use of passive aggression; although he fails to thrive, he is not a failure; and there is no sense that he walls himself off from others.

In the context of this novel, the name “Stoner” conjures up the Greek mythological Sisyphus, who was inseparable from his rock. According to the myth, Sisyphus was condemned to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom every time the summit is reached. The gods, in their wisdom, realized that an eternity of futile labor would be a hellish punishment.

A number of stories explain how Sisyphus came to be punished. One is that he had enchained Death and during that time no human being died. When the gods freed Death, his first victim was Sisyphus.

Even if Stoner’s mythical counterpart is not Sisyphus, he does appear to punish himself. Of what could he feel guilty? He was sent to college with the expectation that he would study agriculture, return, and improve the lot of his subsistence-farmer parents. At graduation, when he informs them he will not be returning to the farm but plans instead to do graduate work in English literature and teach, he looks at his incredulous mother and notes:

... her face twisted as if in pain, and her closed fists were pressed against her cheeks. With wonder Stoner realized that she was crying deeply and

silently, with the shame and awkwardness of one who seldom weeps. He watched her for a moment more; then he got heavily to his feet and walked out of the parlor. He found his way up the narrow stairs that led to his attic room; for a long time he lay on his bed and stared with open eyes.

It could be said that Stoner punished himself for turning his back on his hardworking parents, going against their wishes by choosing literature over agronomy, and for not returning home to work on the farm and applying what he had learned to improve their lot in life. Stoner's marital, parental, and vocational disasters could be considered self-punitive attempts to atone for guilt.

Like Sisyphus, who is inseparable from his boulder, Stoner and his name are one.

Surviving versus thriving

Whereas Stoner, like Sisyphus, was resilient-managing to shoulder the burden of his life up the steep path he created for himself-and a survivor, his creator, John Williams thrived. Born and raised in northeast Texas, he flunked out of a local junior college after his first year, entered the military, and wrote a draft of his first novel while in the Air Force. After WWII ended, he found a small publisher for the novel and enrolled at the University of Denver, where he earned both a Bachelors and a Masters of Arts. He returned to the University as an instructor in 1954 and taught creative writing.

Stoner sold 2000 copies when it was first published in 1965. It was reprinted by The New York Review of Books in 2007, when it was well-reviewed and became increasingly popular. It is currently a best seller in Europe and Scandinavia. Williams died in 1994 and did not live to see its success.

Thriving has been defined in various ways: to grow vigorous, strong, and healthy, as a successful garden; or to be successful in business or money matters. Public recognition or materiality, however, is irrelevant to thriving. It does not matter if the speaker in "Sonnet 73" was or was not "love[d] more strong." Shakespeare used the adversity of incipient mortality to create a remarkable poem. Flowering is an inward phenomenon that results when one discovers that "Sweet are the uses of adversity..." (Act II, Scene I, line 12)⁶

John Williams thrived, although his alter ego, William Stoner, only survived, by turning life's inevitable "poisons" into medicine. Patricia Reimann described the novel's subject matter as being the "final things of life. Love, commitment, compassion, work, backbone, truthfulness, death." (Summarized thus by editor and translator Patricia Reimann of Williams's German publisher Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.)

Disclosures:

⁶ Shakespeare W. *As You Like It*. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/asyoulikeit/full.html>. Accessed October 21, 2013.

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