



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Article

How to Cite: Clark, M 2017 Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams's *Stoner*. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(2): 3, pp. 1–23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.210>

Published: 26 June 2017

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, which is a journal of the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.



ARTICLE

Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams's *Stoner*

Maureen Clark

University of Wollongong, AU
mclark@uow.edu.au

Stoner (1965), John Williams's third novel, questions and complicates mythologised versions of modern American identity and way of life. The story moves through two World Wars, the Great Depression following the Wall Street crash, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New-Deal America, a prolonged time of social upheaval throughout the world. The book re-imagines stuff-of-dreams versions of the American cultural hero modelled on the image of the brash, risk-taking and economically-successful individual of the 1920s decade. The position mediated by the narrative is one of disillusionment with a nation more in step with passionate, impulsive actions associated with cultural heroism than with cool, astute consideration of possible destructive consequences. Confronted and brought into question is the presumption of silence as ineffectual resistance to the injustices that operate within public and private institutionalized power structures. At first glance, Williams's eponymous hero, William Stoner's, wont to quietly internalize, rather than loudly agitate against, conflict-driven social environments, appears to reaffirm this view. Portrayed as a decent man who thinks before he speaks, Stoner's character proffers the idea that silence and care-full thought before acting can be constructive in the pursuit of a better, more balanced way of being in the world. This essay argues that Stoner's habitual interiority functions as a political symbolic filter to challenge commonly-held impressions of heroism understood as a garrulous, action-based cultural code of behavior in the practice of everyday life.

Sometimes, true courage requires inaction; that one sit at home while war rages, if by doing so one satisfies the quiet voice of honourable conscience.

(Geraldine Brooks, *March*)

After writing a first novel about the life-long effects of childhood trauma and the anguish of aloneness in *Nothing but the Night* (1948), in his second, *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), American novelist, poet and academic John Edward Williams (1922–1994) addresses the awakening of human consciousness to the barbaric commodification of wildlife in cusp-of-change frontier America. Williams's third novel, *Stoner* (1965), which is the subject of this essay, exhibits a dark side of university life and the society beyond. *Stoner* functions within a communicative framework which brings to mind Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925). Both novels share character and narrative considerations such as unhappy academic heroes, marriage decay and coherently distinct cultural relevance in their examinations of American national identity. Williams's fourth novel, *Augustus* (1973), is an epistolary work set in Rome in the classical age, a subject that further evidences the author's multiple artistic trajectories. *Augustus* won the prestigious National Book award in 1973, cementing Williams's place as a major American novelist in company with William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow and John Updike to name but a few. *The Sleep of Reason*, a fifth novel, remained unfinished at the time of his death.

The echo of Graham Greene's controversial and overtly political *The Quiet American* (1955) in the title of this essay is unintentional. *Stoner* does however have historical-context-affinity with Greene's book, as *Stoner's* initial publication year was in fact the mid-point of the Vietnam War (1955–1975), coinciding with US combat troops' arrival there. Greene's novel, which is set in Vietnam, writes back to America and was initially published the same year as the earliest shipment of U.S. military aid to that war-torn country. As it is, *Stoner's* narrated time-scheme begins considerably earlier and is located firmly on American soil. The story moves through two World Wars, the Great Depression following the Wall Street crash, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New-Deal America, a prolonged time of social upheaval throughout the world. The position mediated by the narrative is one of disillusionment with a nation

more in step with passionate, impulsive actions associated with cultural heroism than with cool, astute consideration of possible destructive consequences. Also confronted and brought into question is the presumption of silence as ineffectual resistance to the injustices that operate within public and private institutionalized power structures. At first glance, Williams's eponymous hero, William Stoner's, wont to quietly internalize, rather than loudly agitate against, conflict-driven social environments, appears to reaffirm this view. Portrayed as a decent man who thinks before he speaks, Stoner's character proffers the idea that silence and careful thought before acting can be constructive in the pursuit of a better, more balanced way of being in the world. This essay argues that Stoner's habitual interiority functions as a political symbolic filter to challenge commonly-held impressions of heroism understood as a garrulous, action-based cultural code of behavior in the practice of everyday life.

Publication and Reception

When first published in America in 1965, *Stoner* gained modest attention and minimal commercial success. The novel went out of print a year later then re-emerged in England in 1973. In the opinion of British physicist and novelist, C.P. Snow, in the eight years between American and British publication of *Stoner*, "very few novels in English, or literary productions of any kind, [had] come anywhere near its level for human wisdom or as a work of art" (FT 1973: 20). Yet, when reissued in the U.S. in 2003, the novel again received a cool reception in its native land. In his 2007 review, some 34 years after Snow, Morris Dickstein similarly referred to *Stoner* as "something rarer than a great novel — it is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, that it takes your breath away" (NYT June 17 2007: np). As had Snow and others before him, Dickstein wonders why the book was relatively unheard of. It was not until the novel was translated into French in 2013 that, unexpectedly, it began to enjoy wide appeal. Throughout Europe in particular, it became a reader-generated marketing phenomenon. As author and commentator Julian Barnes observes: "*Stoner* became a bestseller. A quite unexpected bestseller. A best-seller across Europe. A bestseller publishers themselves could not quite understand."

(2013: np). Barnes submits that the quiet passivity, lack of optimism and sadness displayed by the novel's melancholy hero accounts, in part at least, for the disparity between European and American readership-interest. During his observations, Barnes cites novelist Sylvia Brownrigg's view that this cross-cultural divergence rests with how the author recasts historically-instilled perceptions of American identity, notably an idiosyncratic determination to speak out and be listened to: "The reticence seems very not American to me," states Brownrigg. "We're such a country of maximalists, noisy ones, and though obviously there are exceptions, even our minimalists are not spare and sad" (2013: np) in the manner of William Stoner. For Barnes and Brownrigg then, Williams's intellectual protagonist lacks the outwardly flamboyant personal qualities American readers find seductive in their literary heroes. Writing in another context but relevant to the commercial success of the novel in Europe as opposed to America, is psychologist, Susan Cain's, historically-based conviction that "early Americans revered action and were suspicious of intellect, associating the life of the mind with the languid, ineffectual European aristocracy they had left behind" (2012: 30). Seen from a modern perspective, the melancholic view of American life proffered by *Stoner's* scholarly protagonist could have proved more suited to the cultural palette of European readers. It may well be that the character offered them a glimpse of the kind of human despondency that mirrored their own experiences of an era haunted by the brutality of two world wars and a global depression.

Tim Kreider's review of the novel bears out Barnes's and Brownrigg's assessments that William Stoner's melancholy character can be regarded as a counter-measure of how Americans prefer to see themselves. In support, Kreider compares Stoner to sentimental favorite, Jay Gatsby, the "roaring twenties" hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which was contemporaneously published with Cather's, *The Professor's House*, mentioned in my opening remarks. In direct contrast to Stoner's air of someone who has become resigned to failure, Fitzgerald's Gatsby is portrayed as a successful, self-made man of mystery who leads an exceptionally lavish, materialistic life-style within the standing 'have-it-all' framework of America's decade of economic prosperity post-WW1. Yet one of the book's most profound ironies is

that the flamboyant Gatsby dies in gruesome circumstances which creditably act as an indictment of the prevailing unhealthy social conditions under which the novel was created. Equally ironic is that Gatsby, who represents culturally excessive wealth-gathering within America's value structure, is in every sense an artificial construct. As though not having a firm identity to fall back on, he is a fantasist who impersonates the kind of individual he needs people to think he is: "Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island [who] sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald, 1990: 95). Born James Gatz, Jay Gatsby never wanted his parents' life as hard working, generational North Dakota farm people: "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (1990: 95). Gatsby's self-invention leaves out the specifics of his birth in favour of an identity more suited to a new way of life in a forward-looking nation that allows personal and historical realities to be by-passed. His live-for-the-moment nature reflects nothing of his country's actual heritage, or a sense of pride in the nobility of his own settler-ancestry's struggles. It is a small step to regard Gatsby as metaphorically representative of the society that spawned him. What readers confront in the scholarly figure of William Stoner, Kreider proffers, is the antithesis of Jay Gatsby. Kreider is right to suggest that Stoner has the air of a man who has not achieved the kind of success that Gatsby represents, but it is also possible to read him as a disruptive force and intellectual observer of American society during the uncertain times in which he "lived".

Heroic Melancholy

Uncertainty is, however, as necessary as doubt in any learning process. Drawn as a long-suffering son, husband and academic, readers learn that Stoner is an intellectual anxious to preserve his own and his university's integrity. Given this, Stoner's fictional persona is recognizable as belonging to what Walter Benjamin calls the melancholic heroic space. As Benjamin has it, driven by metaphysical need, the intellectual subject injured by life's experiences provides a lens through which new insights into historical situations are made possible. According to Max Pensky, such individuals hold the key to understanding "the aesthetics of self through which the suffering of melancholia is, through force of will, bent back on itself in

order to transform the self into a research instrument" (1996: 176) for the study of prevailing social circumstances. Michael Steinberg further tells us that Benjamin was deliberately suspicious of stereotypical cultural heroes "because of their claim to transcend history and become absolute models for the purpose of narcissistic retrieval" (1996: 4). Conceits such as these are never conveyed by Stoner's modest figure. As discussed below, on personal, family and professional levels, Stoner's melancholic heroic space is filled with direct and indirect references to largely unspoken sorrow planted firmly in American society. Allegorically regarded, the character signifies the reality of those quietly resigned to feelings of sadness and despair endured over time in a nation as much marked by political failure, death and social upheaval as it is with a widely proclaimed, self-congratulatory narrative of cultural exceptionalism.¹

Prominence of Personal History

Page one of *Stoner* is self-consciously styled as a brief prologue in which Williams introduces his protagonist as someone who has died. As a consequence, the third person portrayal which follows can only ever take the form of a eulogy whose laws of remembrance traditionally consist of a combination of words and memories that recall, honour and celebrate a life. There is never any sense readers can turn back the pages and reconstruct or rearrange them to make Stoner's earthly existence somehow better or different. Rather, they are strategically placed to wonder what kind of life history will be negotiated and restored in their own imaginative decoding process of posthumously-storied fame to follow. Stoner's accomplishments as a career academic are recognizable upon first acquaintance, as sites of dismissal and forgetting: "few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses" (1). The colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was

¹ Stephen Walt contends that America's self-congratulatory notion that it and its people enjoy exceptional qualities, values and way of life is a myth. Americans are blinded to the fact that they are similar in many ways to other Western-European nations across world. That people come together in pain and sorrow as much as they do in pleasure, is universal. Walt, Stephen M. *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. October 11, 2011. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism>. Accessed January 7, 2017. See also Lipset 1997 and Smith 2013.

alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers (1). Yet promptly overturned in a deliberate and fastidious way, is the idea that Stoner was ever devoid of lasting intellectual legacy and personal history.

The sequence of events that constitute the narrative proper open by constructing Stoner's identity from a specific time and place that expose humble beginnings not unlike those of Jay Gatsby. They also correspond in some respects to the fictional family background of Willa Cather's Professor Godfrey St. Peter. Both hail from the land, although family economic circumstances are markedly different in their individual novelistic worlds. We meet St. Peter as a successful academic in his fifties, married for thirty years to a woman of independent means. St. Peter was "born on Lake Michigan, of mixed stock (Canadian French on one side and American farmers on the other)" (1990: 4) and hails from a large family with "various brother and sisters" (20). He recalls an idealistic childhood spent on a lakeside farm where "the land in all its dreariness could never close in on you" (1990: 20). And, whilst he suffers anguish when his parents sell that much-loved property, Cather's protagonist also enjoys the privilege of happy student years in France (20). In contrast, Stoner is presented as the only (lonely) child of prematurely aged parents: "born in 1891 on a small farm in central Missouri near the village of Booneville" (2), from which he never strayed until he entered university in his twenties. In the Stoner family's experience, the hardship of life on the land had been spirit-draining, but had also "bound [them] together by the necessity of its toil" (2). It is no accident that towards the end of the novel this point is reasserted to confirm that Stoner's unassuming sense of self had been pieced together from the "blood knowledge of his inheritance, given him by forefathers whose lives were obscure and hard and stoical" (226). What Stoner's antecedents encouraged the soil to produce had given meaning to generations of Stoners and, by implication, to many thousands of similarly-owned farm enterprises in America's white history. C.P. Snow points up a truth about the uncertainty of life on the land that is embedded in *Stoner's* instantiate subject matter when he writes: "non-Americans may be surprised to be told of the kind of subsistence poverty

which existed very recently even in white America" (FT 20: 1973). To forget Stoner's impoverished farm heritage would be to dismiss an upbringing that helped to define not just who he was but the nation to which he belonged.

The Specter of Slavery

Although never heralded, the author is not slow to remind us that, much like rural poverty, slavery is also indissolubly bound up with the history of America and that racial prejudice still exists. Early in the story when Stoner leaves his parents' farm for university study, they hire "a Negro field hand"² (24) to replace him. The master-slave relationship is notably implicit in the fact that, like African slaves before him, farm labourer Tobe sleeps in the cellar and works "with a quiet, fierce intensity, accomplishing by himself in a day nearly as much as [Stoner] and his father together had once done in the same time" (24–25). The underlying inference of this situation is the part played by slavery in the conception of America, and which continues to perform socio-political scissions in modern times. For some 250 years, African Americans worked on settler American farms like the Stoners', in the production of commodity crops such as sugar, tobacco and cotton. The practice constituted a long-term system of inhumane cruelty that arose from, and was driven by, the desire for national economic success (see Browne, 1994; Emerson, 1995; Hartman, 1997). Upon the deaths of his work-worn parents Stoner decides to sell the family farm and, as though seeking redemption for past and present wrongs, takes steps to recompense Tobe for his efforts. Here, Stoner's unselfish act is distinguishable as a form of awakening in a time and place where sadness and heroism coincide. Crucially, and not inadvertently, Stoner's actions also marry the historical plight of working-class rural whites to that of urban or semi-rural African-Americans who have suffered from inter-generational poverty. Even as he grieves in silence for his poverty-enduring parents, communicated is the reality that, in race-based matters of separation and inequality, America is historically in debt to the devaluation of human dignity and labour whatever their form. If, like *Gatsby*, we read *Stoner* as a metaphor for the

² Williams' use of the word "Negro" is a sign of the times in which the novel was first published. There is no place for this term in contemporary literature. Either "black" or "African American" are now acceptable.

society and culture he inhabits, to compromise or deny such debt exists runs the risk of devaluing the nation itself.

Beyond the Farm Gate

As it is, for the most part the narrative negotiates Stoner's life from beyond the farm gate. As with Cather's *The Professor's House*, the majority of the novel's setting is American academia. We are told that, 4 years before the start of WW1 at the age of 19, Stoner enters the University of Missouri as a freshman ostensibly to study agriculture so he might be about his father's business. Against the expectations of his parents, however, Stoner re-orientes his future professional life in the study of literature with which he falls in love. As his much admired instructor, Archer Sloane, puts it: "It's love, Mr. Stoner . . . You are in love. It's as simple as that" (19). Stoner's intellectual love affair with literature, which is aptly described as a silent medium: "the minute strange, and unexpected combinations of letters and words, in the blackest and coldest print" (115), offers him the means of finding a new way of being in the world. Stoner's movement from farm to university life is tantamount to a journey in time and space, from the 19th to the 20th century, a shift from a rural to an urban lifestyle that signifies America's entry into the modern, technological age. By association, it evokes the urban migration of countless young American soldiers, (represented by the fictional Gatsby) newly returned home from post-WW1 Europe. The decade we have come to know as the roaring twenties, saw young ex-military men move from family farms to become the face of a fast-paced urban culture bent on personal fulfillment. It is not unreasonable to suggest that such men may well have been disinterested in, or indisposed to meditate upon, either the grim realities of the European conflict or the home-grown problems of unemployment, poverty, social inequality, prohibition and racism (see Hardman, 2016).

As he strives to cope with change, Stoner can be regarded as being in a position of control but also missing from it, an overseer of silent spaces learning to negotiate life (read society) under new rules. There is only silence between the son and his parents who "did not want to disturb him in his new estate" (21) as an academic. Similarly, as a teacher, "he seldom spoke in class" (27) to his students and only ever hears "the

silence of the room" (22). In scenes such as these, silence becomes a metaphor for life's challenging situations and the personal integrity needed to understand and deal with them. The words that might have been spoken but were not, by parents, son and students alike, create in Stoner feelings of loss and a sense of imbalance. He experiences opposed sensations of "inadequacy to the goal he had so recklessly chosen and the attraction of the world he had abandoned" (21). As a consequence, his sense of self-assurance and wonder "remained hidden within him" (26), forcing him to contemplate the wisdom of his decision and marking a significant step towards the narrative uncertainty which is evident throughout the novel.

Silence and Lovers of Literature

Stoner's academic interests take him back-in-time, as do those of another fictional lover of literature, Cather's Professor Godfrey St. Peter. Ever conscious of space limitations, the opportunity is taken here to further reflect on similarities and inconsistencies between the two novels. St. Peter is revealed as "selfish about personal pleasures and fought for them" (1990: 17), egocentric traits Williams's Stoner does not possess. He is also presented as a successful academic in a way that Stoner is not. As though truth's disguise were irony, however, we read that St. Peter's "great work" titled *Spanish Adventures in North America* had taken him fifteen years to finish, between Sabbatical years in Spain, summers in New Mexico and dashes to France to visit family (16). The academic culture inhabited by St. Peter denotes a level of advantage and entitlement foreign to Stoner's storied experiences within the establishment. Yet it is also true that the two characters have similar attitudes of mind. There is, for example, "an unusual weariness in St. Peter" (136) and, Stoner-style, he contends that "the world was sad" (130). The choice he makes is to remain in an old house rather than keep up appearances and move into a new, fashionable one with his wife of thirty years, signifying St Peter's drive for professional and social prestige had lead only to discontent. Traces of Stoner's unhappy marital situation are clear in St. Peter's remembered married life as a "perilous journey through the human house" (18). A different matter sees both protagonists lose a good friend early in WW1 and suffer

that loss in silence. For St. Peter the loss is a brilliant student named Tom Outland, whilst for Stoner it is his colleague, David Masters. As though gifted with the propensity to reanimate history, having achieved “nothing but death and glory” (31), the two ghostly figures haunt the novelistic spaces in which we find them.

A prominent difference is that, unlike Williams’s linear narrative stream, Cather’s story-space is fragmented, namely: “Family”, “Tom Outland’s Story” and “The Professor”, with relevance one-to-the-other built into each component to allow continuity. Formation of the complete story yields the notion that it is as much about the influence of Tom Outland’s brilliance and imagination on St. Peter’s world view as it is about the identity and history of the Professor and his family. Outland is described as “a foundling boy” (98) and man of few words. He tells St. Peter the story of a discovery he made during an anthropological study of peace-loving Hopi culture that, for Outland had “brought with it great happiness. It was possession”, he says (226). Speaking from his position of unknown heritage, Outland believes he had discovered an antidote to life’s demands and cares: he had “found everything, instead of having lost everything” (227). Recognizable as someone “who had never handled things that were not the symbols of ideas” (236) Outland’s discovery turns on a spiritual rather than real sense of self and place which links the meaning of “possession” to a well-established Indigenous understanding that human beings belong to the land, the land does not belong to them. Just as do silences in Stoner’s fictional world, what remains unsaid in Outland’s story authorizes meaning for St. Peter: its “plain account was most beautiful because of the stupidities it avoided and the things it did not say” (238). And what mattered was not so much its truth, but the lost communal values Outland’s story signified. The lack of superfluous words about Outland’s discovery harks back to Homer’s *locus amoenus*, the imaginary pleasant place of classical literature with its idealistic notion of the possibility of escape from the reality of a flawed world. Outland’s metaphysical imaginings may lead readers to wrestle with the dynamics of his discovery but, in the final analysis, they do not help to resolve the sadness of the fictional society in which we encounter the well-to-do, yet sadly dissatisfied St. Peter, who believes “life as it has been has been a mistake” (78).

Academic Pursuits

With a nod to Cather, Williams reminds us that themed classical literature arising from the work of Homer merged during the Middle Ages into Christian theology which, idealistically, embraces things higher than the pursuit of wealth and fame. Stoner's dissertation topic, "The Influence of the Classical Tradition on the Medieval Lyric" (40), seems to provide an insight into a character with a private passion for an idyllic time untouched by the idea of progress. But Stoner's selection of thesis subject is ambiguous. As though attempting to convey deeper meaning, Williams contrives to link Stoner's interests to what was co-terminously known as The Dark Ages; hundreds of years of human misery, grisly feudalism formed amid long wars and deathly pestilence in both England and Europe. Evoked in this context is the fact that, since the seventeenth century, war and its related discourses have been a defining factor in the formation and shaping of American identity. By association, Stoner's choice of study can again be regarded as well-suited to the uncertain times in which he lived. By the novel's end, those times saw a concentration of dark events: wars, economic downturn, unemployment, hunger and poverty, all of which contributed to the grim reality of twentieth-century American social fabric.³ The America of William Stoner's tale does not lose sight of the ongoing plight of those turned off the land, the labourers without labour, without homes. True to his quiet nature, however, Stoner remains silent about the injustices he sees around him: "He did not give voice to this awareness; but the knowledge of common misery touched him and changed him in ways that were hidden deep from the public view" (227). Yet it seems clear, that Stoner's reluctance to speak out encourages readers to re-think how history might have been written differently. In other words, had those of similar moral persuasion lent their voices to the storied world then being told for community consumption, another level of meaning could well have been produced and acted upon.

³ See for example Jill Lepore. *The Name of War. King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity*. New York: Vintage. 1999.

Marital Conflict

In the course of events Stoner marries above his station, summoning the idea of America as the class-free civilisation to which much of the Western world still aspires, but which the novel makes clear is not the reality. Contrary to the frame of poverty and toil in which Stoner's upbringing is located, his wife, Edith, is described as the only child of middle-class St. Louis parents, the daughter of a father with an ill-conceived idea of his own self-importance (58) and a pretentiously dissatisfied mother "of an old and discretely impoverished [Southern] family" (59). Typical of her time and circumstances, Edith is raised in a formal atmosphere where distant, irreproachable courtesy prevails. Serious issues are never discussed, or rarely even thought about (54), and life is interpreted for Edith by her narrow-minded parents who deny her meaningful engagement with its trials and joys. The imposition of blandness and respectability imposed upon Edith can be seen as a form of familial psychological violence which impacts upon her emotional health. Bereft of warmth and closeness growing up, she suffers from poverty of the spirit, loneliness being "one of the earliest conditions of her life" (54). Consistent with the times out of which she comes, Edith's moral teaching is prohibitive such that she regards sex in marriage as a duty she feels bound to fulfill rather than as something to enjoy or cherish (54).

The marriage of Edith and William Stoner is entered into, and played out, in unhealthy circumstances. Signaled by the "cold wind that blew upon them" (56) and mirroring the dismal WW1 social conditions under which they live, mythical conceptions related to the ease of upward social mobility in America are overthrown. As the marriage degenerates, Edith returns to the familiar interests of her pre-marital social life. She joins a theatre group, plays the piano, raises funds for charity and, in the process of meeting people of similar persuasion, shuts her husband out (120–121). But Stoner does "not speak to Edith about her new behavior; her activities caused him only minor annoyance" (121) and were irrelevant to him. Suggestive of a form of humility related to class and a sense of personal commitment that runs deep, he holds himself "responsible for the new direction her life had taken" (121) and the withering of their love for one another. "And so he had his love affair" (194). The innocent are

almost always involved in any marital (read national) conflict and Edith responds by turning Stoner's much loved daughter against him. As though he had been wounded in war, Stoner's loss of his daughter's love is described as a form of death whereby he "longed for something – even pain – to pierce him, to bring him alive" (184). With tongue placed firmly in cheek, Williams has Edith exhibit psychological and behavioural manifestations of a descent into madness. From a literary perspective, the author works self-consciously within Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason paradigm, a site of dangerous otherness within the confines of the marital home.⁴ The home in which Stoner lives with a wife who despises him: "you really do hate me, don't you Edith", he says (128) is presented as a form of war-zone. At every turn, Edith voices her resentment of their mismatched union and "announce[s] to him a new declaration of war" (117). Yet Edith's animosity and malevolence hardly register in Stoner's psyche. Not knowing what else to try or do, he "looked upon it all – the rage, the woe, the screams, and the hateful silences – as if it were happening to two other people, in whom, by effort of the will, he could summon only the most perfunctory interest" (240). True to form, Stoner defends himself, not with matching loud aggression, but with implacable silence as his weapon of choice. For him, speech was futile for there was no point in winning this particular war if he could not win the peace. In time, life becomes a struggle for individual survival and "they seldom spoke of themselves or each other lest the delicate balance that made living together possible be broken" (122). Insofar as it has the capacity to save or destroy, for a time at least, silence becomes a redeeming factor in the maintenance of Stoner's un-homely home. As a not-insignificant pupil of life's disappointments, Stoner's silence in the face of marital unhappiness and transgression can be read as avoidance of definable responsibility for a level of familial pain in which he is inextricably bound up. Read another way, however, it is creditable to understand the sadness of Stoner's daily conflict as both a by-product and a measure of the fraudulence of the American dream as it pertains to the stability of family life and the politics of class.

⁴ Critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar regard the othering of the Bertha Mason character as a problematic patriarchal construct, discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this essay. (see Gilbert and Gubar 1979).

Devaluing the Language of War

Furthering its interest in war or war-like relationships, the novel presents American participation in the WW1 conflict as a source of collective national duty and sentiment which assigns heroic status to those who choose to participate in its life-or-death consequences (32–36). Yet the passive qualities of Stoner's character do not fit with a propensity for flag waving expressions of patriotic enthusiasm in times of war and beyond. Rather, Stoner relies on his own way of making sense of the situation and in the process demonstrates there is no courage without difficult choice. Unlike his fellow academics, he does not proclaim loudly what he has to say. Only after silent struggle to determine his position, does he decide that “he would not fight the Germans” (37). His decision not to go to war lends a broader political dimension to the narrative which points to a level of confusion operating alongside the corruption of moral order. As we read:

Once there was a brief-lived demonstration against one of the professors – an old and bearded teacher of German languages, who had been born in Munich [. . .] but when the professor met the angry and flushed little group of students, blinked in bewilderment, and held out his thin, shaking hands to them, they disbanded in sullen confusion. (32, 33)

Stoner chooses not to live according to the political conditions under which war is fought, but recognizes as real the hatred among people that war creates and is sorely tired of it. Neither a patriot nor hater of enemies, he “had talked about the war in Europe with the older students and instructors, [but] he had never quite believed in it; and now that it was upon him, upon them all, he discovered within himself a vast reserve of indifference” (33). Stoner never speaks the language of war. To borrow a phrase from Kittsteiner, instead he “applies the subjective gaze of the melancholic observer” (1996: 59) in order to devalue the use of language as an instrument of manipulation and subversion. The novel does not promote the idea that all “Germans were there to be hated” (33) but questions whether such hatred is warranted. Readers are asked to step back, evaluate and consider on what grounds hate is founded and what might be gained, or lost, from it.

There are conflicting elements of the rebellious and the pacifist to be found in Stoner's character, a paradox that not only speaks to the ambiguity of the entire figure but to the mythology of heroism as a politicised code of behavior that demands action and violence. It remains to his mentor, Arthur Sloane, to remind him of the importance of retaining a sense of humanity beyond political disputes: "A war doesn't kill off a few thousand or a few hundred thousand young men," he says. "It kills off something in a people that can never be brought back" (35). It has been said that doing nothing in times of war is the same as collaborating with the enemy. However, Stoner's impartial uncertainties and disinclination to take political sides, suggest there is a need to show compassion for both sides of a struggle. At the most basic level, the character offers a very different lens through which to repudiate some of the trumpeting glamour of war-related discourses which silence the maiming and killing that is the reality of war's underside. Stoner's wars are in fact most clearly articulated as "wars and defeats and victories that are not military or recorded in the annals of history" (36). Instead they are fought, won and lost in everyday society's battlefields, enshrined in the belief that violence or the abuse of power are not ways to resolve oppositional positions or situations, whatever forms of conflict they may take. As we have seen, one such battle is fought and lost by Stoner on the domestic front, which Williams finally presents as a cruel environment in which family members come to learn that they have little to say to one another (279). Another is fought, lost and yet somehow won, within the walls of Stoner's university where the value of narcissistic behaviour and the self-important system of representation from which it stems, are interrogated. This particular conflict is central to the novel's layering of representational socio-cultural interests and it would be useful to recall it here.

The Abuse of Power in Academia

The narrative permits the assumption that internal power-plays within academic walls are thick with interference in the ebbs and flows of both private and public life. As noted above, a minor character, David Masters, is killed in WW1, a detail which serves as a reminder of the fate of Cather's Tom Outland. Masters appears in the

story of Stoner's life as a "ghost [that] had held [him], all these years, in a friendship whose depth they had never quite realized" (283). Masters' assessment of university life is as a refuge for the homeless: "The University exists for the dispossessed of the world" (31), he says. But he is also of the view that, much like Edith's parents and the pretentious world they represent, academics must have their "pretences in order to survive" (39). Consistent with Masters' notion that academics lack a sense of the real world, Stoner considers university life as having the potential to provide him with "the kind of security and warmth that he should have been able to feel as a child in his home, and had not been able to" (39). As we have seen, nor was Stoner ever able to be at home within his marriage but, on the contrary, was positioned to see love as a burden rather than a joy.

In the patterned world of the novel, it is possible to regard Stoner's university environment in similar terms as a site of disillusionment and despondency. What readers are given is an intellectual world of converging professional rivalries which simultaneously speak of the kind of attraction and revulsion, love and loss found within Stoner's childhood and marital homes. The theme of captivity in both family and university environs constitutes the novel's principal unanswered (un-American) conundrum: how to be at home in a "world that was like a prison wherever [one] turned" (219). In Williams's hands, the disharmony of the family, be it academic or domestic, become inseparable from the idea of America as an oft-times alienating, unhomey space rather than a welcoming land of hope, freedom and privilege. Yet it is also within the academic world of the novel that the development of Stoner's heroic character, albeit a tragic one, reaches its most decisive point. Stoner's habit of silence is at last broken when he comes to realize how much reality is an effect of language use and that it is naïve to assume academia offers safety and rationality when in fact it does not.

The long-awaited arousal of Stoner's anger arises from a sense that honour is being sacrificed to the desire to win at all costs. One of the novel's most powerful dramas develops when outwardly confident vociferousness is pitted against lack of intellectual substance. The scenes are choreographed in an atmosphere of cheating by a student who is proven to know little about the subjects on which he is examined

by Stoner and other faculty members. It is played out by warring academic identities who no longer share the same values, namely Stoner and his nemesis, Professor Hollis N. Lomax. The latter is introduced as an unsettling, walking contradiction: a man with “a small hump” a body “grotesquely misshapen” (93) but who has “the face of a matinee idol” (94).⁵ Just as disconcerting, however, is that Lomax’s student protégé and the novel’s cheating pretender, Charles Walker, enters the narrative similarly signified as nefarious, with an impaired arm and leg. Kreider is correct when he contends that such “marking of evil with deformity strikes a twenty-first century reader as heavy-handed” (2013: np). But it is also true that characters such as these are readily found in literature where ‘otherness’ metaphorically serves as the effect, rather than the cause, of social situations created by or for them.⁶ It could well be that Williams is being self-consciously playful when he so establishes the malevolent mischief-makers, Lomax and Walker, as other. Since both Lomax and Walker represent abrogation of responsibility for their own actions, the apparent tactlessness of the sinister physical images Williams creates for the professor and his ne-er-do-well student reflects monstrous behavior of their own duplicitous making.

Walker is rendered disruptive, outspoken and unenlightened, someone whose lack of ability is made up for in self-belief. His words are delivered as presumptuous claims to fact, as though his mere utterances were powerful enough to be transformed into knowledge. The character’s loud, immodestly abrasive behaviour is an indictment of the development of gregariousness as a distinguisher of human worth. In class, he interrupts “with questions and comments that [are] so bewilderingly far off the mark that Stoner [is] at a loss as to how to meet them” (141). Along with his craftiness, Walker’s performance is described as a colossal bluff (146), the cause of infinite silences between his fellow students and Stoner alike. In the evolution of

⁵ Consciously or unconsciously, the mischievous little hunchback, a German fairy tale figure, is conjured up by Williams in the figure of Lomax. The little hunchback appears throughout stories concerned with the life of Walter Benjamin. (See Arendt introduction to *Illuminations*, 1992: 21).

⁶ By way of examples, metaphorically speaking, the deformities of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* represent not only his otherness but an effect of his crimes whereas Rymer’s *Varney*’s wrongs are signified by his monstrous body (see Donna Heiland, 2004: 113).

events, under comprehensive oral examination, Walker is shown to be a fraud and a trickster. In play are the workings of a shameful venture of collaboration between supervisor and student. And Lomax stage manages it all, surreptitiously leading his weak protégé in the scholarly direction he wants him to go. When, for example, Walker asks that a question be repeated (159): “Lomax pretended a good natured puzzlement and asked for clarification” (160). That done, Walker proved himself able to continue in a voice “fluent and sure of itself, the words emerging from his rapidly moving mouth almost as if” (160) he had been coached. It was, Stoner admits “a masterful performance” (160) by both supervisor and student during all of which he had remained silent. Only when the performance ends does Stoner call out the stage-crafted collaboration based on his professional capacity and authority to do so, providing real evidence upon which to object to Walker’s deficiencies.

Most revealingly, recalled in this scene and acting in symbiosis with love and war, are the early words of Stoner’s mentor, Archer Sloane: “the scholar should not be asked to destroy what he has aimed his life to build” (36). As with protests against war, however, Stoner’s lone challenge to the state of affairs hardly matters in the face of the corrupt nature of power within the confines of the University. The narrative gives every sense that Lomax and Walker have reparations to make for their part in attempting to manipulate an academic process “designed not only to judge the candidates general fitness, but to determine strengths and weaknesses, so that his future course of study could be profitably guided” (157). Insofar as Stoner having mastery (pun intended) over the situation, however, the rules of war and the rules of power prove to be the same. The “winner” has already been decided and Stoner’s efforts to bring either Lomax or Walker to account are defeated. After the event, the ambitious Lomax battles with the hypocrisy of his actions: “his face was red, and he seemed to be struggling with himself. Stoner realized that what he saw was not anger, but shame” for trying to dupe those he felt threatened by (182). Yet the battle was not over: “Stoner was willing to concede defeat; but the fighting did not end” (180). Rather than admit to tactical cunning, Lomax accuses Stoner of a lack of sympathy towards Walker’s “unfortunate physical affliction” (181). Disability, not responsibility for subverting the system, becomes the opportune strategy in the maintenance of

power, with long term effects. For more than twenty years, silence reigned between them and “neither man was to speak again directly to the other” (182).

These scenes construct and interrogate the university community as an extension of a world which, historically, always ‘wins’ on the basis of hierarchies of power. They also stress that people in positions of power still listen to those who speak the loudest and that systemic unpredictability in matters of integrity and responsibility continue. Worth recalling at this point is David Master’s view that University life was “a refuge from the world, for the dispossessed, the crippled” (172). But as Stoner has it, Masters “would have thought of Walker as – as the world. And we can’t let him in. For if we do, we become like the world, just as unreal” (172). By virtue of Lomax’s self-deluding vanity and abuse of power, the transgressing Charles Walker is allowed to return unpunished to the university, the undeserving beneficiary of his mentor’s powerful position. Notwithstanding this, in the closing stages of the novel, a form of honour without fame “began to attach to [Stoner’s] name, legends that grew more detailed and elaborate year by year, progressing from personal fact to ritual truth” (237). As though this is the end point to which the story of the melancholy Stoner has been moving towards, he becomes “an almost mythic figure” (238) an unexpected and unlikely American hero.

Conclusion

Over time, defiant false-hope peddlers of new and old political persuasion have consistently fostered the idea that America could, on its own terms, be a nation filled with confident, heroic individuals bent on the pursuit of freedom and happiness. Williams’s meditation on the nature of silence and the heroic space offers a crucial difference in the way heroism is enacted. Encountered is a melancholy, ambiguous character damaged by life; a man who has not so much achieved success at his personal level of experience, but become resigned to disappointment and failure. Indeed at the close of the novel, Williams has Stoner dispassionately and quietly contemplate the failure that his life must appear to others (284). Yet Stoner dies knowing just who he was and believing “that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been” (287). In the figure of William Stoner, we are given a new-old sound

that explores the more commonly tread cultural terrain of heroism to show that thoughtful silence can be both constructive and father to the deed. Stitched into his quiet, thinking self is a constant measure of tragedy which accepts sadness and loss as part and parcel of all life stories, including those of a nation. As with other Western European countries, America has its own myths about itself and its heroes which give shape to people's aspirations but at the same time cannot be spoken without reference to historical realities. The subdued acquiescence typical of the fictional Stoner acts as a sustained metaphor for the uncontrollable socio-political processes which helped to define his and his country's character. Silently on the page, it gives voice to the socio-historical identity of a nation which, like so many others across the world, has been forged from unforgettable moments of both greatness and unspeakable sadness.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Barnes, J** 2013 Retrieved from: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/13/stoner-john-williams-julian-barnes>.
- Benjamin, W** 1992 (1973) *Illuminations*. London: Fontana Press.
- Brooks, G** 2005 *March*. Sydney: Harper Collins, pp. 207–8.
- Browne, S** 1994 “Like Glory Spectres”: Representing Evil in Theodore Weld’s *American Slavery as It Is*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 80: 277–92. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639409384073>
- Cain, S** 2012 *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Cather, W** 1990 *The Professor's House* (first published 1925). New York: Vintage Classics.
- Dickstein, M** 2007 (June 17) The Inner Lives of Men. *New York Times Sunday Book Review*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/books/review/Dickstein-t.html> (Accessed 5/11/2017).
- Emerson, R W** 1995 Lecture on Slavery. *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Gougeon, L and Myerson, J (eds.). New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 91–106.

- Fitzgerald, F S** 1990 *The Great Gatsby* (first published 1926). London: Penguin.
- Gilbert, S M and Gubar, S** 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Princeton NJ: Yale University Press.
- Hardman, J** 2016 Poverty and Prejudice: Social Security at the Crossroads. The Great Depression and the New Deal. *Edge: Ethics of Development in a Global Environment*. Retrieved from: https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/soc_sec/hgreat.html (Accessed 6/29/2016).
- Hartman, S V** 1997 *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heiland, D** 2004 *Gothic & Gender: An Introduction*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470775691>
- Kittsteiner, H-D** 1996 The Allegory of the Philosophy of History in the Nineteenth Century. *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*. Steinberg, M P (ed.). Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 41–61.
- Kreider, T** 2013 (October 20) The Greatest American Novel You've Never Heard Of. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-greatest-american-novel-youve-never-heard-of>.
- Lepore, J** 1999 *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity*. New York: Vintage.
- Lipset, S M** 1997 *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Pensky, M** 1996 Tactics of Remembrance: Proust, Surrealism, and the Origin of the *Passagenwerk*. *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*. Steinberg, M P (ed.). Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 164–89.
- Smith, P** 2013 *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century*. Yale University Press.
- Snow, C P** 1973 (May 24) Good Man and Foes. *The Financial Times*, p. 20.
- Steinberg, M P** (ed.) 1996 *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Williams, J** 2012 *Stoner* (first published 1965). London: Vintage Books.

How to cite this article: Clark, M 2017 Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams's *Stoner*. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(2): 3, pp.1–23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.210>

Published: 26 June 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, which is a stylized 'O' with a person inside, representing open access.