

# The (Im)Possibility of Academic Integrity in John Williams's "Stoner"

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20th Anniversary Issue

Edited by

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# Preface

## **FOCUS 2018: 20th Anniversary Issue**

*Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies* is a peer-reviewed biennial journal launched by the Department of English Literatures and Cultures at the University of Pécs, in 1998. The present volume is the 20th Anniversary Issue, edited by Csaba Maczelka, Andrew C. Rouse and Livia Szélpál, of whom Andrew is an old hand having edited other issues of *Focus* from 2000 onwards, while Csaba and Livia are relatively new to the field. Over the years most members of the department have had the chance to take part in the editorial work. Since the inception of the journal the contributors of essays and reviews have been established or aspiring scholars or PhD students from a broad range of universities in Hungary, Great Britain, The United States, Ireland, Austria, Germany, Crete, Croatia, Serbia, and elsewhere. The 2002 issue, focusing on Joyce, was reviewed in *Irish University Review*, the 2004 and 2006 issues on film/video and British Studies and American Studies respectively in the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, the 2008 issue focusing on Anglophone and Hungarian literary and cultural encounters in *EPONA*, while the 2012 issue, devoted to Irish theatre from international perspectives, was reviewed in *Irish Theatre International*. So *Focus* has reason to celebrate: we have published a good number of substantial articles over the years, a thematically structured selection of which became included in the first, rather bulky “*Focus book*” under the title *Encounters, Intersections, Adaptations in Anglophone Literatures, Popular Culture, Theatre, and Film*, edited by Zsuzsa Csikai, Mónika Fodor, Gabriella Hartvig, Mária Kurdi and Gabriella Vöö in 2016.

Through its content, the anniversary issue the reader holds in hand reflects the general directions *Focus* has been following during the last two decades. The section on British culture and literature opens with David Atkinson’s essay “Women and the Ballad Trade in Eighteenth-Century England,” which offers a rich survey of the divergent roles women took in publishing and selling ballads at that time. As the author suggests, research into this area provides new data and more details concerning ballad repertoires, as well as complicating the general (and sometimes flawed) picture of women’s economic activities and social status in the given era. Remaining in the eighteenth century, Gabriella Hartvig’s essay, “‘The first will serve the bookseller’s purpose’: Sterne’s double title page in *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*” is a piece of philological scrutiny into some telling aspects of the relations between Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and his book of sermons, discussing the ways in which they reflect on each other in spite of representing different types of writing. Throughout her exploration, the author refers to and quotes from numerous brief newspaper notices and advertisements, which are valuable and sometimes revelatory documents from the 1760s. The section closes with Andrew C. Rouse’s “‘Hark! I Hear the Cannons Roar’: Twenty years in the life of a “new tune.” Here the author follows the variants of a tune that first appeared in an English street ballad relating the defeat of the Turks at Vienna in the seventeenth century.

The following two sections of the volume comprise four essays on American fiction, drama and film, respectively. Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljak Rehlicki write about an arguably special campus novel under the title “The (Im)Possibility of Academic Integrity in John Williams’s *Stoner*.” Here the co-authors discuss *Stoner* as a rather untypical campus novel which, through the eponymous protagonist’s tragic fate, transmits the worrying idea that the humanities and the humanist way of thinking are no longer relevant in our era. Thus, Matek and Rehlicki claim, the novel creates a new type of tragic hero, the teacher of humanities. Next, László Sári B’s essay, “Crisis and Literature: Future Imperfect, or the Case of Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*” argues that *Cosmopolis* (2003) marks a new turn in its author’s later career by juxtaposing postmodern ideas and a poetic use of language while transgressing the confinements of the technological sublime, an aesthetic mode that had characterized DeLillo’s earlier work.

The essay on American drama, “Legacies of the Past and the American Family: Sam Shepard’s *True West* and Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Topdog /Underdog*” is by Lenke Németh. It offers a comparative analysis of *True West* (1980) and *Topdog /Underdog* (2002), pinpointing that despite the two playwrights’ different cultural backgrounds and inspirational forces, both of these works address the devastating effects of the absence of an authentic past. The highly creative use of metadramatic elements in both plays is also explored by the paper, in this way referring to developments in contemporary American theatre. Flanking Németh’s contribution Réka M. Cristian’s “Journeys Into Night: Age-wise Cinematic Constructions in *Cas and Dylan* and *Our Souls at Night*” addresses the imbedding of certain cultural narratives in two recent North American movies in order to investigate the markers of lifecourse identities and the ways in which the (self-)representation of senior citizens are challenging cultural myths of aging through various acts of performativity.

In the third section the only essay on Irish theatre is Bence Gábor Kvéder’s “The Witness, the Silenced, and the Rebel—Women in Search of Their Voice: Female Characters in Brian Friel’s *Translations* and Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*.” Here the author stresses the importance of Friel’s “heroines” as prototypes and forerunners of the problems and ideas embodied by Devlin’s three female protagonists, hypothesizing that despite the 150-year difference between their plots, the portrayal of women’s experiences in the two dramas sheds light on some of the most acute and devastating social and cultural traumas Irish people have had to face during their troubled history. Kvéder’s paper is followed by an interview conducted by Mária Kurdi with Deirdre Kinahan, author of several both socially oriented and formally experimental plays contributing to the treasury of the contemporary Irish theatre. In this interview Kinahan also talks about her latest stage work, *Rathmines Road*, at some length, which premiered during the Dublin Theatre Festival in October 2018, harvesting considerable audience success whereas provoking critical debates at the same time. The anniversary issue of *FOCUS* is closed by two reviews, one of which offers comments on a collection of essays published in honour of the centenary of Arthur Miller’s birth written by Livia Szélpál. The subject of the other is a book which demonstrates in detailed analyses of plays new, philosophically grounded theoretical approaches to figurations of the dramatic character in British postmodern theatre, reviewed by Mária Kurdi.

I would like to express thanks and gratitude to all the contributors for their papers and book reviews which appear in the issue, as well as to the three conscientious working editors, Csaba Maczelka, Andrew C. Rouse, and Livia Szélpál. Special thanks are due to the invited members of the advisory board for this particular issue, whose valuable help has been instrumental in bringing the text of the submissions into their final form. Hopefully, the journal will celebrate many more anniversaries with collections of essays reflecting scholarly dedication to, and interest in novel readings and interpretations of both earlier and contemporary literary works and cultural phenomena or practices across the vast and extremely productive Anglophone world.

Mária Kurdi  
Editor-in-chief





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# The (Im)Possibility of Academic Integrity in John Williams's *Stoner*

Ljubica Matek, Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

## Introduction: The Campus Novel

Written in 1965, *Stoner*, the recently re-discovered academic novel by John Williams (1922-1994) deals with a variety of intriguing issues such as the role of literature in the personal growth of an individual, the tension between private desires and social customs, and the role of family in an individual's life.<sup>1</sup> By some, it was read as "an all-American success story ...[about] socio-economic mobility through hard work, individual effort, and merit" (Wald 2). Our paper, however, will focus on the portrayal of issues such as academic integrity and the perception of academics and academic work. Williams's novel, not only through the story it tells, but also as an object, as a work of art, seems to reflect on the worrying idea of the irrelevance of the humanities, the humanist way of thinking, and humanist preoccupations, and does this in a way that is rather untypical of most campus novels.

In the broadest sense, the campus novel (used synonymously with the terms academic novel or college novel) is defined as a genre of academic satire that portrays academics and students in their professional environment (the university), and deals with politics and policies impacting higher education. This relatively new yet distinctive genre of Anglo-American literature developed from earlier works depicting academic life and its conflicts. For example, John O. Lyons states that Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828) represents "the first American novel of academic life" (5), and Elaine Showalter argues that the precursors of academic fiction were also Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) and Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) (*Faculty Towers* 5-6). However, most critics agree that the modern campus novel established its form, content, and conventions in the mid-twentieth century with Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* (1954) and Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954).

By its very generic nature, the campus novel is quite restrictive concerning the setting and the protagonists, which prompted Adam Begley to ponder on its decline asserting that its material would soon be exhausted as "campus novels always cover the same turf" (40). However, in her book on David Lodge, Merritt Moseley stresses Lodge's opposite view of the matter. He claims that "[i]n theory, everybody disapproves of academic novels, as being too inbred and stereotyped. In practice there seems to be a very big public for them. People like reading them" (8). This is no wonder since "the

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1 In her review of the novel titled "Classic *Stoner*? Not so fast," Elaine Showalter raises important questions about Williams's misogyny and the problematic representation of Stoner's wife, Edith. This feminist approach to the topic is certainly valid and worth further research.

absurdity and despair of university life; the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; . . . the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities” as well as “sexual adventures of all types” (Scott 82), provide a lot of ideas for the writers of such fiction. In fact, in addition to Lodge, some of the most prominent English or American writers such as C. P. Snow, Vladimir Nabokov, J.M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, Kingsley Amis, and Tim O’Brien, to name a few, have tried themselves out in academic fiction, and the readers’ appeal to the genre is not solely related to the reputation of these authors. As Showalter notes, campus novels “comment on contemporary issues, satirize professorial stereotypes and educational trends, and convey the pain of intellectuals called upon to measure themselves against each other and against their internalized expectations of brilliance” (*Faculty Towers* 4). Moreover, William G. Tierney notices the didactic function of the genre by saying that it helps “academics think about how academic life has been structured, defended, and interpreted in order to create constructive change” (164). Similarly, Lodge explains the popularity of the genre by asserting that the “university is a kind of microcosm of society at large, in which the principles, drives, and conflicts that govern collective human life are displayed and may be studied in a clear light and on a manageable scale” (34).<sup>2</sup> However, it seems that in its attempt to represent human life on a smaller scale, the campus novel often resorts to certain stereotypes.

The research of Sally Dalton-Brown and Robert F. Scott into the conventions of academic fiction reveal that most novels feature a very similar protagonist. According to Dalton-Brown, the protagonist of the campus novel is hardly an admirable persona: “*Homo academicus* . . . is depicted as a fool, fraud, or philanderer” (591), and Scott adds even more “well-established stereotypes” about professors to the list: buffoon, intellectual charlatan, the absent-minded instructor, the wise simpleton, the lucky bumbler, the old goat, and the fuddy-duddy (83). Moreover, the university setting is usually portrayed as one that encourages “foolishness, fakery, and philandering” and that “requires considerable cunningness if it is to be survived” (Dalton-Brown 591, 592). Janice Rossen sees it as a place of “exclusion and marginalization, rife with class-consciousness, misogyny, competition, and xenophobia” (7). The plot usually revolves around the protagonist’s moral dilemma of “whether to opt for the life of the mind or the life of desires [sexual, or power- and status related]” (Dalton-Brown 592). Scott complements these ideas by stating that “these works tend to dwell upon the frustrations that accompany academic existence . . . the antagonistic relationships that exist between the mind and the flesh, private and public needs, and duty and desire” (83). In addition, contemporary campus novels, according to Dalton-Brown, offer an either/or ending—the protagonist might choose to fight for his survival within the institution, or simply escape in order to discover anew “a creative originality once freed from generic confines” (592). Connor, too, detects “two basic plots in academic fiction”—the one that concerns the disruption of the world and ends in the

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2 In the second edition of his comprehensive bibliography *The American College Novel* (2004), John E. Kramer lists over six hundred novels written between 1828 and 2002 that deal with American higher education, students, and professors thus affirming the campus novel as a legitimate and popular genre within American literature.

regained stabilization, or the other that focuses on the character who must escape the gravitational pull of the academia” (qtd. in Showalter, *Faculty Towers* 4).

Furthermore, when it comes to the tone of such novels it seems that, despite the general definition of the genre, claiming it to be a satirical one, campus novels are more often entertaining (even comic) than thought-provoking and satirical (Dalton-Brown 597). Accordingly, Scott believes that “campus novels are essentially comedies of manners” that “even when . . . lightly satirical in tone, they nonetheless exhibit a seemingly irresistible tendency to trivialize academic life and to depict academia as a world that is both highly ritualized and deeply fragmented” (83). Furthermore, in his dissertation, *The Academic Novel in the Age of Postmodernity*, Péter Székely states that the attribute “satirical” has been arbitrarily added to the definition of campus novels (18-19). Besides, campus novels often contain auto/biographical elements since many of their authors are actual university professors who fictionalize their own teaching and academic experience (for example, Mary McCarthy, C. P. Snow, John Williams, David Lodge, and others), or professional writers who have taught at universities and “observe[d] the tribal rites of their colleagues from an insider’s perspective” (Showalter, *Faculty Towers*2). Due to this fact, campus novels can be seen as “social documents” (Rossen3) whose auto/biographical elements might be used as “as part of the serious, systematic analysis of higher education”(Anderson and Thelin 106-07), since many capture social processes and changes of a particular period of time.

### ***Stoner*: Beyond the Confines of the Campus Novel**

While it is clear that *Stoner* belongs to the body of works comprising academic fiction, this paper argues that it diverts from typical representations of professors as buffoons interested only in the most immediate, base and basic concerns such as their sexual escapades or personal well-being told in a humoristic tone which often accounts for their popularity. In contrast with this, Williams’s approach to the subject is far more serious, and instead of opting for quick success, he was more interested in creating something less assuming, but far more significant. Therefore, when Williams presented *Stoner* to his agent, she warned him about not getting his hopes up as she did not believe it could ever become a bestseller. Indeed, once published in 1965, the novel was respectably reviewed and reasonably sold, but soon afterwards went out of print (Barnes) as it probably did not meet the readers’ expectations from a novel set within the confines of a campus. Nevertheless, Williams believed that the novel had merit and “in time it may even be thought of as a substantially good one” (qtd. in Barnes).

One of the reasons why twenty-first century readers rediscover *Stoner* as one of the great American academic novels is that it is a serious, beautifully written novel which raises important questions about the social position of teachers, society’s expectations concerning the outcomes of the educational process, and the purpose of liberal arts education in general. More specifically, the novel shows Williams’s concern about the situation in which education is being increasingly commodified, and portrays Stoner as a tragic hero whose “flaw” is his refusal to participate in faculty



politics and meet corporate demands that have become more important than actual academic merit. By this, *Stoner* may well be a representative of the traditional kind of professor that most teachers may identify with and that most —unfortunately—will see as a dying breed.

In light of Rossen’s claim that campus novels can be seen as “social documents” (3), it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the representatives of the genre address certain important social concerns. The issues of the decline of humanist education, of the need for such education, and of the future of education have been the focal points of various philosophical, pedagogical, and sociological texts since the very establishment of academia. The discussion has been intensified in the last decades as a result of changing university politics and policies to suit the fiscal policies of the Western world, and the reluctance of governments to further invest in humanist education.

As one of the results of the intense debate, Friedrich Nietzsche’s lectures *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (1872) have been republished under the title *Anti-Education* (2016). Its republication, and under a new title, could serve as a reminder not only of the (relative) relevance of his thoughts on education for the present moment, but also of the relevance of the topic of education itself. In fact, Nietzsche begins his lectures by saying that the topic is “so serious, so important, and in a certain sense so unnerving, that I, like you, would listen to anyone who promised to teach me something about it” (3-4). Among those who reacted to the republication of this text was Ansgar Allen, who criticizes Nietzsche’s ideas and argues “against their use in the attempted redemption of the humanities or education” (197). However, as Allen points out certain flaws in Nietzsche’s argument, he also reminds the readers of some of its strengths, namely that it tackles the issue of “rebuilding education on an entirely different value base” (199). Although Nietzsche explicitly refers to German culture as completely corrupted and in need of full reconstitution, his views are by extension pertinent to other (that is, most of Western) cultures whose educational systems seem to be in an ongoing crisis, as judged by the amount of attention given to the topic.<sup>3</sup> Allen supports the general notion of a non-conformist education as Nietzsche proposes it, but he also explains that Nietzsche never offers a solution to the crisis of education and that an educational messiah never arrives although educators continue to believe that our “redeemed profession will eventually triumph against everything that debases education” (199). This, in fact, is the problem. Instead of waiting for a “divine intervention” which will change the current culture of consumption and commodification, educators and students should be aware that

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3 Here are just a few examples to illustrate the point, starting from 1968: Coombs, Philip H. *The World Educational Crisis. A Systems Analysis*. Oxford UP, 1968.; McLean, Martin. “A World Educational Crisis?” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. 16.2 (1986): 199-211; Jay, Paul. *The Humanities “Crisis” and the Future of Literary Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Pells, Rachael. “Computers and textbooks will not solve growing global education crisis alone, major report finds.” *Independent*, 30 Sept. 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/computers-textbooks-growing-global-education-crisis-alone-report-international-initiative-for-impact-a7340196.html>. Accessed 5 Oct. 2018.; Schmidt, Benjamin. “The Humanities Are in Crisis.” *The Atlantic*, 23. Aug. 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/>. Accessed 5. Oct. 2018.;

they contribute to or might even be the source of the problem, and that real education comes from within and one's innermost desire to learn (Allen 208). Or, in Nietzsche's words, people would have to be "revolutionized before a revolution could take place" (*Untimely Meditations* 140).

Through his novel, Williams concurred with the above line of thought, as *Stoner* tells a story about an educator who possesses the intrinsic desire (what one might idealistically define as the "pure" desire) to learn and teach, and who finds himself unwilling to conform to the developments in university policies and politics that do not directly (and solely) address such a desire. His noble attitude and general selflessness are rather out of character for typical protagonists of campus novels because his life is not marked by the moral dilemma between life of the mind and life of desires (Dalton-Brown 592); Stoner always does what he knows and believes is right in the greater sense of things, even if it causes his own personal unhappiness. His unpretentiousness and focus on his work combined by his (symbolically) noble death with his own book in hand may even be said to make the reader experience the cathartic effect of classical tragedies. Moreover, the significance of his character is underlined by the fact that he is the eponymous hero of the novel, a convention more typical for tragedies and *Bildungsromans* than for campus novels, which promotes a reading of the central character as a tragic hero.

### **The Academic as Tragic Hero: Humanist Education and the Constraints of Capital**

Aristotle's classical definition of the tragic hero implies that the tragic hero is "better than people are now" (21). Moreover, "the central figure in a tragedy makes the choice that makes him vulnerable to the frightening things that destroy him" (Sachs 6). Stoner is "better" as he displays integrity and intelligence that surpasses those of his peers and shows him an oddity in a world of conformists. This makes *Stoner* a distinct text within the body of campus novels because of its stark departure from humoristic stories of "academic buffoons." Indeed, the novel possesses a certain specific quality of tone and diction that makes it both completely unassuming, and quite moving. According to Morris Dickstein, it is "something rarer than a great novel—it is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving it takes your breath away." For Tim Kreider, Williams's "pellucid prose" does not make the novel trivial or easy to read; on the contrary, the way Kreider describes it one can hardly not be reminded of Aristotle's demand for language of beauty and magnitude that imitates life: "there is something in even those first paragraphs, an un-show-off-y assurance in the prose, like the soft opening notes of a virtuoso or the first casual gestures of a master artist, that tells us we are in the presence not just of a great writer but of something more—someone who knows life, who maybe even understands it." Furthermore, Michael Meyer defines tragedy as "[a] story that presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death" (2144). The latter view thematically and formally situates *Stoner*

within the mode of tragedy, even though the novel is not set in the world of classical mythology nor written for the stage. Kreider does not explicitly consider *Stoner* to be a tragic text, and yet he describes it in terms that echo Aristotle's *Poetics*: "The novel embodies the very virtues it exalts, the same virtues that probably relegate it, like its titular hero, to its perpetual place in the shade." Stoner's undoing, that is his *tragic flaw*, is his choice not to comply with the powerful forces of politics and money, which makes him an academic outsider and prevents his success. This certainly evokes both pity and fear in the reader.

It is interesting to find that Eli Wald's reading of *Stoner*, dedicated to the issues of capital, claims that one of the reasons why the novel's protagonist fails to become a world class scholar, despite his integrity, honesty, and hard work, is his lack of "economic, social, and cultural capital" (20). Wald's arguments are compelling and his reading shows that, despite the traditional idealistic (or old-fashioned and outdated, as some might argue) perceptions of the academia as a separate entity, a heaven for free critical thought in which progress and success are based on merit, the world of academia is inextricably tied to the constraints of the capitalist system which exerts a decisive influence on it. For example, Wald points out that, as an academic, Stoner "would have been more likely to succeed professionally, publishing a second and a third book and gaining promotion to full professor" (25), had he been better-endowed with social and cultural capital, which would serve as a cushion against professional and personal challenges. The very idea is unsettling as it implies that the "purity" of scholarly research is a utopian concept and that political savvy is crucial for academic success. Therefore, "[t]he value and purpose of academe is a key concern of the novel, while one of its main sequences describes a long and savage piece of departmental infighting" (Barnes), again proposing that the very existence of academic research is highly dependent on funding and politics. For most researchers, this may seem demoralizing as the myth of academic autonomy is revealed to be a lie.

The idea of merit is also tainted as it turns out to be equally important, if not secondary, to capital: "The point is that sometimes taking a stance and attempting to enforce meritorious standards may result in significant loss of capital ... The lesson is not that one should forego merit in such circumstances but that enforcing standards, at times, can and should be navigated politically to minimize loss of capital" (Wald 33). The priority of capital over merit is a disheartening notion to anyone who dedicates their life to teaching. All the work that teachers dedicate to foregrounding the importance of honest and hard work as a prerequisite for success and personal development is marred by "real" life, which demonstrates that other factors, such as money and connections, seem to be far more important—not only for the students, but for the teachers, too. In fact, "[s]uccess and failure are not a function of individual effort and merit but of capital: relationships, connections, and manipulation of knowledge" (Wald 41). In this regard, the novel further highlights the tragic and possibly futile position of teachers. This is confirmed by the author's widow who explains that with this novel Williams was really "working out what it meant to be a teacher" (qtd. in Livatino 419). Indeed, Stoner's life echoes the struggles between idealism and the market-oriented approach to education, and embodies in fiction the centuries-long (and still ongoing) philosophical discussion on the subject.

In the eighteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt maintained the idealistic stance that one should learn to grow and improve oneself as a person, to gain spiritual “substance,” whereas those who merely strive for profit or material gain are not to be admired (59). The essential incompatibility between the desire for this kind of education and the demands of the workplace embodied in the dialectic process between the need for individual emancipation and the socio-cultural demands was further discussed by Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno claims in his “Theory of Half-Education” (“Theorie der Halbbildung,” 1959) that proper learning requires leisure that is free time (93-121). Konrad Paul Liessmann builds on these theses and offers an etymological clarification, asserting that the word *Schule* (school) comes from the Greek *scholé* (Lat. *schola*), meaning leisure (62). The idea presupposes having enough time to improve oneself, to read and learn instead of being constantly oriented toward achieving particular material goals. Liessmann maintains that due to a failed educational reform, education has lost its meaning and its reputation. The worker (*Arbeiter*) did not become knowledgeable (*Wissender*), but the knowledgeable have become workers (43), and by analogy, universities have become companies that have to apply a specific ranking system and advertise themselves in the market in order to survive (78-82). Liessmann does not recommend that universities should discontinue the teaching of practical skills, but there should be a general awareness and understanding of the difference between learning critical thinking (education) and learning skills, that is, training for practical work tasks (64-66), and the need for both rather than just the latter.

Correspondingly, the moment when Stoner discovers his love for literature in class, which makes him switch his major to English and become a teacher instead of getting his degree in agriculture and returning to his parents’ farm ready to continue in their footsteps, seems almost romantic. Material livelihood becomes less relevant than the spiritual livelihood he finds in literature, corresponding to the idea of a Humboldtian *Bildung*. According to Mel Livatino, *Stoner* “is as heartfelt a probe into academic life and the vocation of scholar and teacher as one is ever likely to read” (419). However, much of the novel’s strength and beauty arises precisely out of its tragic quality; on the one hand, the novel shows how reading enlightens Stoner as he realizes there is moral beauty in pure academic study that contributes immensely to a person’s moral and intellectual growth. On the other hand, it reveals that much of the university’s autonomy is an illusion, since university as an institution now strongly depends on politics and capital, which trump any idealistic search for “substance.” Stoner stands for the view of university as a shelter from the material world, and in this he reflects Williams’s own opinion that “Once a university becomes what universities often say they are—a reflection of the will of the community . . . it’s dead” (qtd. in Livatino 421). However, other characters show that such a perception of the university is naïve because without the community’s money, it cannot exist. This dichotomy renders the novel both devastating and inspiring as the reader realizes the extent of Stoner’s persistent idealism and noble-mindedness. Thus, his demeanor plausibly supports the thesis that the character of a university professor who insists on his integrity may be the literary tragic hero of our time.



### Academic Integrity and University Politics in *Stoner*

The lives and behavior of the faculty and students at the fictional English Department depicted in the novel testify to the fact that the university is not an isolated entity that can exist on its own. The world outside, with the global changes of the twentieth century (brought about by the World Wars) and the rise of capitalism in the United States immensely influence, if not start to dictate, the university politics and academic integrity presented in *Stoner*. Early in the novel, the readers briefly meet Dave Masters—a master of insight and reflection. He, Gordon Finch, and William Stoner form a close friendship as young graduate students just before World War I. During one of their discussions, Masters refers to “the true nature of the University” (28), disagreeing with the notion that the university can serve either as a means to personal growth or material success and economic stability. For Masters, the university is a shelter for those who otherwise would not be able to survive or succeed in the outer world. He sees the University as “an asylum or . . . a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent” (29). Despite his sarcastic, or even negative, portrayal of the University and its staff, Masters claims that the University is “still better than those on the outside, in the muck, the poor bastards of the world” (31). He also insightfully detects the existence of the outside powers, that is, the political and economic forces, but believes that the University is somehow immune to their influence (31). Masters comments on Stoner’s vision of the University, summarizing it in three words: “The True, the Good, the Beautiful,” and portrays it as a “great repository . . . where men come of their free will and select that which will complete them, where all work together like little bees in a common hive” (28). This kind of University embodies the true liberal arts principles, that is, *Bildung*: the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, constructive arguments, and critical thinking; it is a place where people work in unison for a greater good.

In Williams’s novel, Archer Sloane and William Stoner embody this vision of the University both historically and ideologically. Sloane teaches and Stoner gains knowledge for the same goal: to find some kind of meaning. This is best portrayed in the scene where Sloane asks the young Stoner to explain the significance of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 73.” Although Stoner cannot articulate the sense of the poem, it becomes obvious to both of them that the written word means *something*, if not *everything* to Stoner. Moreover, Sloane proves to be a true mentor who recognizes Stoner’s love and dedication, and encourages him to become a teacher. The early-twentieth-century University depicted in the novel serves a shelter for Stoner, who has no wish or plan to leave it after graduation, and a place where professors and students together uphold liberal, humanist values. Rather than being a shelter for the “infirm,” as Dave Masters maintains, it seems that it is a shelter for pure knowledge, a place where the desire to learn is also a prerequisite for and the goal of the educational process.

However, the utopian vision of the University as separate from all the worldly matters of life cannot hold true. The outbreak of World War I proves that the University is a weak shelter against global affairs that start to bite into the foundations of humanist principles. A true humanist, professor Archer Sloane, withers away,

bearing witness to the madness of the war that has depleted the university of the staff and students. He is crushed by the realization that his teaching must have been futile when the young minds abandoned him overnight and went to make the world “safe for democracy” (Wilson 7), and argues that a war does not just kill people: “It kills off something in a people that can never be brought back. And if a people goes through enough wars, pretty soon all that’s left is the brute, the creature that we—you and I and others like us—have brought up from the slime ... The scholar should not be asked to destroy what he has aimed his life to build” (35-36). Feeling in the same way, Stoner easily resists the collective mania to join the war and fulfill his patriotic duty since he “could find in himself no very strong feelings of patriotism, and he could not bring himself to hate the Germans” (37). Instead, he completes his graduate program and becomes a teacher at the Department of English, sharing Sloane’s life purpose of a true humanist to create and love, and not to destroy and hate. In the midst of war, such a non-pragmatic, ethical, and idealist attitude illustrates just how at odds with the world Stoner really is: “too weak, and . . . too strong. And [with] no place to go in the world” (30). Stoner finds his calling in literature, research, and teaching, thus continuing Sloane’s legacy. Besides, as admirable or close to the humanist ideal as his life may be, the reader senses a constant aura of tragic failure emanating from him, which further underlines the incompatibility between humanist values and the corporate entity that the university slowly becomes.

Two decades later, the havoc repeats itself with World War II, but the post-war period seems to temporarily revive the University and repair the cracks in the foundations of humanist values. The GI Bill enables veterans to enroll and study free of charge, and their maturity and dedication to learn make these post-war years “the best years of his [Stoner’s] teaching . . . and . . . the happiest years of his life” (257). Students “were intensely serious and contemptuous of triviality. Innocent of fashion or custom, they came to their studies as Stoner had dreamed that a student might—as if those studies were life itself and not specific means to specific ends” (258). Despite this short spell of the humanities’ revival, the novel shows that the transformation of the University from within is inevitable. After Archer Sloane’s death, William Stoner remains among the very few to uphold and defend the liberal values of the University. Sloane was replaced by a new department member, Hollis Lomax, whose work ethic and idea of success run counter to Stoner’s from the first. Lomax is the representative of the “new” University of cut-throat business politics and intrigues. In a way, he becomes Stoner’s opposite as he is portrayed as arrogant, disrespectful, and almost hostile towards his colleagues, for the simple reason that he can afford such behavior: “Somehow Lomax has got his finger in the president’s nose, and he leads him around like a cut bull” (171). His strong political connections to the University’s President represent valuable social capital, which turns out to be far more important than his professional credentials.

In fact, Lomax’s arrival gives *Stoner* a prophetic quality as it seems to predict the changes within higher education, not only in this fictional University, but also beyond the limits of the text itself. Namely, in recent decades and years critical voices have emerged that speak about the ideological change in the sphere of higher education, and interestingly enough, they echo the events foreshadowed in Williams’s novel. Rebecca Lave lists five principles of neoliberal science regimes that universities have

been subjected to for decades: (1) reduction in public funding, (2) separation of teaching and research, (3) disregard for peer-review, (4) tyranny of relevance, and (5) intellectual property protection (21-22). The analysis of these processes, as they are described or hinted at in the novel, indicates that universities started to undergo these changes long ago. It could be argued that Williams presciently created the character of Hollis Lomax as a personification of the (future) neoliberal science regime that undermines Stoner who is the embodiment of more traditional humanistic principles. Whereas Stoner teaches to build the character and spirit of his students “for the greater good,” Lomax sees education as “as an individual’s investment in her own human capital” (Lave 22). As seen above, Wald’s analysis of the novel also criticizes Stoner for not possessing or investing into his (social and cultural) capital, due to which he falls prey to Lomax and his like, who are openly adamant to the idea of professionally and personally thriving, even at the expense of their colleagues.

Despite the overt antagonism between Stoner and Lomax, they manage to work independently within the department. However, when Charles Walker, Lomax’s mentee and protégé, joins one of Stoner’s graduate courses, the conflict between the two ideas and visions of the University and education becomes unavoidable. Walker, too, uses his social capital in order to disrupt the teacher-student relationship when asking for a “favor,” and not “permission” (134) to join his classes past enrolment day. Furthermore, all students present their papers on a selected topic for Stoner’s graduate course on time, except Walker. And once he finally delivers his presentation, Stoner witnesses an improvisation that leaves him amazed and appalled at the same time:

However florid and imprecise, the man’s [Walker’s] powers of rhetoric and invention were dismayingly impressive; and however grotesque, his presence was real. There was something cold and calculating and watchful in his eyes, something needlessly reckless and yet desperately cautious. Stoner became aware that he was in the presence of a bluff so colossal and bold that he had no ready means of dealing with it. (143)

In addition to bluffing, Walker tries to discredit another student’s<sup>4</sup> oral report although he has no valid arguments but uses a pretentious and snobbish language and attempts to appeal to the emotions of the audience (141). In order to defend his integrity as a professor, Stoner fails Walker despite immediate threats from his superiors. This act involuntarily involves Stoner into politics and intrigues caused by others’ personal interests and lust for power. For the first time in his life, he feels that

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4 This other student is Katherine Driscoll, a young instructor at Stoner’s department with whom Stoner shares the same passion for knowledge and literature. The fact that Stoner and Katherine soon start an equally passionate love affair might seem as Stoner’s lack of professional (and private) integrity. However, Katherine was at the time employed at the University and not technically his student, since she asked Stoner only to “audit the seminar” (138) while she is working on her dissertation. In that sense, their brief affair is not the one based on an exploitative teacher-student relationship as depicted in some campus novels (e. g. *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee). Rather, their relationship is like one between two colleagues.

he must fight for the humanist vision within the University and he is adamant not to allow incompetence, laziness, as well as politics to undermine or destroy its integrity. The little social capital that he has (friendship with Gordon Finch) Stoner uses in order to weed out Walker by reminding Finch of Masters' ideas of the University: "Dave 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, just as . . . The only hope we have is to keep him out" (172). However, Finch only states that "We can't keep the Walkers out" (Williams 171), as he is aware that the University has become a battleground of private professional and financial interests, and those who do not join the game, lose. Another principle that Lave examines in her paper is the disregard for peer-reviews, which can also be seen in the novel; the Preliminary oral comprehensives scene serves as the prime example of this phenomenon. In front of other colleagues (peers), Stoner masterfully reveals Walker's true character, the one that masquerades pretentiousness and nepotism as knowledge. He discloses Walker's laziness, incompetence, shallowness, and lack of knowledge of English literature, which raises suspicion that he made it to the postgraduate level not by learning and researching, but rather with the help of his social and cultural capital. Despite all this, Stoner's arguments and remarks are swept under the carpet, and Walker stays in the program, which openly demonstrates that power and connections are becoming more important than knowledge and integrity even at the highest educational levels.

In fact, the episode with the oral exam infuriates Lomax (now Head of Department), who retaliates against Stoner and not against the student who does not have the bare minimum of knowledge required for postgraduate studies. Namely, Walker changes Stoner's schedule, making him work from dawn till dusk and thereby disabling him from writing and publishing another book. This is what Lave calls the separation of research and teaching, which means that more value (and money) is attached to research since the product of the research might be capitalized upon (22). Through his retaliation, Lomax prevents Stoner from advancement in his field (as he has no time to write another book) and, in spite of his excellent teaching, he is seen as a poor scholar who makes no contribution to science. Lomax's underlying idea, of course, is to disable Stoner's production of knowledge and to advance sooner and gain a better position, that is, more power, for himself. In other words, teaching becomes an undesirable and underprivileged profession entirely irrelevant to science since it results in no physical product to buy or sell. By extension, if one is only teaching, there is little chance of professional advancement, something also evident in the novel: Stoner holds a tenure-track position, but prevented from doing research "he did not rise above the rank of assistant professor" (1).

The tyranny of relevance is another feature of current educational policies that directly undermines the humanities as such, since there is little "applied research" (qtd. in Lave 23) in its fields. As Lave states, knowledge and research are influenced by private interests of corporations who have no need for the "non-commercial research in the humanities" (23). Similarly, when Lomax takes away Stoner's advanced courses, he is directly disabling the curiosity-driven research and exchange of ideas (that should be or had been the core of any research). With this move, Lomax is once again using his position to ghettoize Stoner from the humanities, which are already in an unfavorable



situation. This fictional situation foreshadows contemporary developments in real life, since today's higher education has switched from its humanist principles and introduced "an ideology that reduces all values to money values" (Deresiewicz 26). When suggesting that money is the ultimate value, William Deresiewicz writes about contemporary USA, but his arguments can easily be extended to globalized Western university policies, too. In his view, the true objective of humanist thought is "to learn, think, reflect and grow" while "constructing a sense of purpose for [oneself]" (27-32); he is bearing witness to the fact that today's curricula are predominantly oriented towards some practical vocation and focused on material gain. In this way, academic integrity becomes an irrelevant matter—a sad situation foreshadowed by Williams's novel written more than fifty years ago.

## Conclusion

In summary, it seems that Williams's prediction concerning *Stoner's* delayed success has come true. Much of that success arises from Williams's deep, even prophetic understanding of the constraints of being a teacher in a world where information, not knowledge, is the main currency. In a time of project-oriented research, academic integrity becomes less important than political savviness and project-managing skills. Opposite to this, the novel is substantial in its gravity and reinforcement of the value of reading and academic study as a means to understand life, and as a reminder that current attitudes about the freedom, surveillance, and control of the individual threaten its very core (Barnes).

Importantly, *Stoner* is not a typical campus novel. Rather than perpetuating the image of a professor as a buffoon in a story resembling the comedy of manners, Williams wrote a remarkable piece of tragic literature in the Aristotelian sense. On the one hand, its prose is *pleasing* in as much as it is almost lyrical due to its condensed and emotional quality. On the other hand, the novel is also tragic because it introduces a new type of tragic hero: the teacher of humanities. As a professor, Stoner is genuinely noble, and so focused on his work that he misses his mark when failing to see (or refusing to comply with) the changing environment. He dies holding his book in his hands, aware that its commercial value, the keyword of the economically oriented, is not what is important. The book is a part of him; it is a product of his research, his work and life, and he feels love for it. As he dies, a ray of sunshine falls on one of its pages and the moment is transcendent, possibly cathartic: what he has learned, known and has created cannot be reduced to dollars and cents, and it is irrelevant what the book means to others because it is the embodiment of his (hard and honest) work. Contrary to the general consumerist stance, education and academic work are not products to be marketed, bought, or sold; they are a necessary part of an individual's growth. Stoner's book can therefore be seen as a testimony of a teacher's life, much like Williams's novel, whereas their metatextual relationship highlights just how essential reading and writing are to people. By the end, even if the reader does not experience a traditional catharsis in witnessing the death of Stoner, a man who valued his principles more than money, s/he will likely have a sense of epiphany about life, education, and the fleetingness of time.

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