

Existentialism as Portrayed in *Stoner*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze a novel titled *Stoner* (1965) written by an American academic and author, John Williams. *Stoner* follows the life of William Stoner, a professor of English Literature. Stoner comes from an impoverished farming family with a unique existential ethics. He works his way to become a university instructor and learns the magnitude of passion in the success of life. This study uses Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralist theory. The goals of this research are: 1) to analyze the structure of the literary work; 2) to understand the historical background that influences the novel; and 3) to reveal the author's world view. The study shows that John Williams captures an existential tradition belonging to American lower-class farmers who lived around the late 19th century. Stoner also captures the transformation of the existential tradition following a social, economic, and political transition. Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* is used as a reference to explain the manifestation of the existential idea.

Keywords: *existentialism, mental habit, modification, poverty, world view*

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses *Stoner* (1965) by American academic and author, John Williams. Stoner tells the story of William Stoner, a tenured professor of English Literature at the University of Missouri. Stoner is raised in an impoverished farming household. From his parents, he has inherited the passive endurance ethics and tenacity stemming from the habituation of living in poverty. However, unlike his parents, Stoner has an access to higher education which allows him to improve his financial circumstances. The improved circumstances also allow him to recognize the magnitude of passion in the success of life.

Stoner explores an interesting subject. It discusses an existential idea and provides an insight into the social context which necessitates the development of such philosophical attitude. *Stoner* depicts how the development of existential philosophy is intermingled with the struggles of American farmers and the following socio-economic changes in the early 20th century.

It is interesting to find an existential discourse which attaches itself to certain social group living in the 20th century. Upon further investigation, existential movement was also popular on the other side of the continent (Baert, 2011). This movement was popularized by three prominent philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus.

Camus's idea is chosen to conduct this study, mainly serving as the reference to the existential enterprise. His idea is chosen because of its ideological similarities with the novel, which shall be explored in the discussion. Albert Camus and John Williams also came from similar impoverished background and shared similar struggles. They were also not too far in age. This particular similarity is significant as the article tries to define the mental attitude of certain group of people and its relation with the social context as portrayed in a literary piece.

Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*

in 1965. Apart from the metaphysical questions, Camus's idea centers around the realization that life is meaningless (Manav, 2013; Veit, 2018). This realization gives way to the absurd, a technical concept which describes a feeling. Camus defines the absurd as a sudden realization, an awakening of the sensitivity of the mind that finds life to be a chaos impervious to reason, a realization of the denseness and strangeness of the world (1965: 11). When one realizes that life is absurd, one subsequently realizes that life is naturally alienating, incomprehensible, and difficult (Arinze & Onwuatuegwu, 2020; Gloag, 2020). The nature of the awareness may incite discouragement. According by Camus (1965), some people even resort to suicide and he thinks that suicide is useless. The absurd awareness should not discourage humans from useless means for it is essentially a resolution (Gloag, 2020). Upon comprehending the absurd, Camus suggests humans to accept their fate: their mortality and inability to understand the chaos that is life (Arinze & Onwuatuegwu, 2020; Gloag, 2020). Camus is also pragmatic about this realization. He formulates certain ethics that should help people to live, "more as opposed to living better" (Gloag, 2020: 7). These ethics comprise revolt, freedom, and ultimately passion (Camus, 1965).

This study falls under the sociology of literature category. The goal of this study is to understand the mental attitude of Americans in the early 20th century and its relevance to the philosophical movement in that period. The theoretical framework, therefore, should help structure and attain the goal of the analysis.

Genetic structuralism is a literary theory proposed by Lucien Goldmann, a Marxist sociologist. This theory falls under the sociology of literature category (Hasanah, 2022). As a theory whose validity has been tested, genetic structuralism provides a structured method of analysis and specific variables which assist in this research process (Faruk, 2012).

Several key concepts from the theory are to be discussed briefly. First, this theory recognizes a literary piece as a meaningful structure. A structure refers to a cohesive unit of words which constitutes a larger meaning (Hasanah, 2022). Second, a group of people with similar background develops similar world vision of the surrounding environment (Goldmann & Boelhower, 1980). This world vision refers to the technical term of 'world view'. A world

view is the aspiration and feeling that a person develops as a result of his interaction with his social group and environment (Atmana & Sumitro, 2020; Goldmann & Boelhower, 1980). This world view "links together the members of social group (a group which, in most cases, assumes the existence of a social class)" and differentiates them from members of other social groups (Goldmann, 1977: 17). Third, a literary piece cannot be understood if it is removed from the context for it is the abstraction of the social consciousness (Hasanah, 2022). In simple terms, a literary piece is an insightful text that discloses how people of certain period of time and space perceive their environment and society. In addition, Goldmann asserts that cultural works, such as a literary piece, are considered significant if "they express a global image of man and the universe (1977: 41)." In addition to being understood in a structural context, a literary piece has to be understood with regard to the progression of humanity throughout history (Mayrl, 1978). Lastly, this theory uses a dialectic method (Faruk, 2012). The dialectic method follows the hermeneutic principle. This method emphasizes the relation between text and context to establish fuller meaning.

Stoner was published in 1965 but the public reception remained low especially in its home country (Clark, 2017). Researches and studies, although limited, have shed interesting insights into the discourses discussed in the novel. In his thesis, *How Existentialism Affects Generic Tradition in the Fiction of John Williams*, Lezy analyses John Williams's three novels which include *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), *Stoner* (1965), and *Augustus* (1972). Utilizing Mary Warnock's existential idea, Lezy finds consistent philosophical discourse in the three novels (Lezy, 2015). This article is the first confirmation of the existential discourse in *Stoner*. Lezy's article, however, does not discuss the relevance of the philosophical discourse to the socio-economic context of the period.

Another article referred to is *Listen to the Sound of the Quiet American: John Williams's Stoner* by Maureen Clark. This article covers a diverse range of issues, especially how the novel defies the nature of the generic American cultural heroism with its depiction of a passive and stoic hero (Clark, 2017). Despite the wide range of discussion, Clark does not touch the existential aspect of the novel.

The last study referred to is by Bima Atmana, titled *Genetic Structuralism Analysis in Go Set A*

Watchman by Harper Lee (2020). Despite covering different objects of analysis, this article is used as an important reference to genetic structuralism application on literary analysis.

Despite the complexity and comprehensiveness of the previous researches, none has used genetic structuralism as a framework in revealing the existential worldview in *Stoner* and its sociological implication.

The hypothesis of this article is, *Stoner* discusses an existential idea that expresses the world view or world vision of the lower class Americans in the 20th century. The construction of the world view (the mental habit) is influenced by poverty. Upon further investigation, this mental habit is significant, because it reflects a universal awareness. The existential habit in *Stoner* is the reflection of the existential philosophy of Albert Camus. This is because both the author of *Stoner* and Camus came from similar social class and had shared similar struggles particularly in the economic sector. From the hypothesis, three research variables are drawn, namely, the structure of *Stoner*, worldview, and social structure.

This study applies qualitative approach to analyse the data. The data comprise primary data and secondary data. The primary data are taken from the novel in the form of linguistic units that are significant and relevant to the theoretical framework (Faruk, 2012). The secondary data are facts and information about historical events that happened in America before and around the 20th century as well as a reference to existentialism from Albert Camus's book *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The secondary data are taken from books, journal articles, theses, internet archives and other resources.

This research starts with collecting and analyzing the primary data. This process reveals the structure of the novel. The second step is gathering and analyzing the history of significant events in the novel. The last step is to connect the elements to each other to establish a point of equilibrium and coherence which Goldmann calls 'homology' (Goldmann & Boelhower, 1980: 29). This process culminates in the revelation of the author's worldview.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The discussion starts with the first variable, that is the structure of the literary piece, and ends in the

exploration of the social structure. William Stoner, the main character, is born in 1891 to poor dirt farmers. Dirt farmers are people who survive from farming on poor land without the help of hired laborers ("Dirt Farmer," 2022). Stoner's family (the Stoners) works hard but remain poor. Despite the difficulty, the Stoners find a common ground in the toil. The novel then portrays how the family's circumstances necessitate the main character's disciplined parenting habit. Starting by the age of six, Stoner is introduced to the labor force. He is assigned several chores including milking 'the bony cow', feeding the pig, and gathering chicken eggs, as well as schooling which he views as another chore "somewhat less exhausting than those around the farm (Williams, 1965: 17)." The chores assigned to him grow as he ages yet his attitude remains as stoical as before.

The novel depicts the Stoners' life as a cheerless manual labor (Williams, 1965: 91). The labor breaks their wills and numbs their intelligence. The Stoners' view of life is elaborated further in the following passage.

At thirty his father looked fifty; stooped by labor, he gazed without hope at the arid patch of land that sustained the family from one year to the next. His mother regarded her life patiently, as if it were a long moment that she had to endure. Her eyes were pale and blurred, and the tiny wrinkles around them were enhanced by thin graying hair worn straight over her head and caught in a bun at the back (Williams, 1965: 31).

The passage describes how the family is affected by the financial struggle. The father looks 20 years older than his actual age and his back begins to hunch. He sees life with certain attitude of hopelessness stemming from the awareness of the arduous living circumstances. The mother's "pale and blurred" eyes reflect the husband's hopeless mental attitude (Williams, 1965: 13). Life is seen as a void and enduring struggle. As Stoner ages, he begins to mirror his father's physical description. His face becomes "haggard" as he loses weight and "the stoop of his shoulders increases" (Williams, 1965: 72).

The physical description is interesting to examine for it discloses the metaphysical views of the Stoners as the reflection of a larger social constitution. This description is reminiscent of the fate of Sisyphus as interpreted in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus is a

Greek mythical character who betrays God (Arinze & Onwuatuegwu, 2020; Verhoef, 2014). For his betrayal, he is punished by being made to carry a rock up to the top of the mountain only to see it tumble down. When the rock tumbles down the hill, Sisyphus has to redo the process all over (Raskin, 2001). With the realization of his inevitable fate, Sisyphus develops a mental habit which helps him endure his suffering (Arinze & Onwuatuegwu, 2020).

The rock is a metaphor that represents a tragic fate (Camus, 1965). Similar to Sisyphus, the Stoners also suffer under financial burden that their backbones begin to hunch. To emphasize the void of their existence, they grow old, die, and “become a meaningless part of that stubborn earth to which they had long ago given themselves (Williams, 1965: 91).” As the novel progresses, the philosophical view is transformed after the main character experiences a socio-economic transition from accessing education. Goldmann explains that a transition of a structure is typical for a structure is not static (1980). Structure is dynamic in a sense that it continually transforms itself following the needs of the individuals within the society (Goldmann & Boelhower, 1980).

Poverty and misery shape the Stoners’ metaphysical experience. However, they are indifferent to it, in the sense that they do not regard the situation as a thought-provoking experience that gives birth to metaphysical views. The Stoners do not address the awareness in any dialogues throughout the novel. Acceptance and endurance are seen as prerequisites to sustain life. Throughout his life, Stoner maintains this indifferent attitude.

Other existentialists are often preoccupied with the question of finding the meaning of life (Azhar, 2013). However, Camus deviates from this view and declares that ontological pursuit, the striving and confidence to explain and attain meaning in life, is entirely useless (Aronson, 2021). Camus acknowledges that humans always have “this desire of unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion” which may be provided by meaning (Camus, 1965). However, he is determined not to fall for such appeals and accept that life is simply incomprehensible instead. This view is echoed in *Stoner*.

He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity that was entire, he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion of

triviality. He has conceived wisdom, and at the end of the long years he had found ignorance (Williams, 1965: 220).

Stoner dreams of unity and integrity but he does not find them. Instead, he finds compromise and diversion. He finds that meaning is impossible to attain. Both *Stoner* and Camusian existentialism agree that there simply is no meaning in life and therefore, looking for it is essentially useless. Therefore, Stoner comes back to his family’s ethic, the ethic of indifference.

They develop a common ethic to present world faces that “expressionless and hard and bleak (Williams, 1965: 176).” The ethic and knowledge run deep within them that the novel addresses the awareness as a ‘blood knowledge’ (Williams, 1965: 176). The novel interestingly stresses how the blood knowledge is tightly related to the social construction through addressing the awareness as an inheritance (Williams, 1965: 176). Therefore, based on the description, three conclusions are drawn. First, poor farmers in the novel live under constant economic stress which shapes their mental habit. Second, they are indifferent to metaphysical questions. Third, they develop an unaffected and stoical common ethic which epitomize their identity as a social unit.

The three conclusions are explained by understanding the social structure relevant to the time period pointed out by the novel. According to Cotkin (2003), existentialism had deep roots in America. Two relevant historical archives record that most Americans around the 19th century worked as farmers and many of these farmers were poor (Edwards, 1940; Hambidge, 1940). Their economy typically was one of self-sufficiency (Edwards, 1940). The records further elaborate how these farmers worked hard, mainly manual labor, but remained on the verge of starvation (Edwards, 1940; Hambidge, 1940). These early American settlers developed a self-reliance which gave birth to their keen sense of individualism (Edwards, 1940; Hambidge, 1940). Community only provided them with a kind of semblance of social life (Edwards, 1940). They lacked the time, means, and stimulus to be interested in philosophy or aesthetics or to finesse their intellectual faculty which led to a narrow provincial outlook (Edwards, 1940). These lower-class farmers epitomized their mental attitude and habit which highlighted the character of the nation

at that time (Cotkin, 2003; Edwards, 1940).

The author was part of the described history. Williams's grandparents, the Walkers, were poor dirt farmers who moved places following the opening of new settlements, a continuous impermanence forced by their economic demands (Shields, 2018: 13). The Walkers also did not have a house. They helped raising young Williams because his mother lost her husband during his infancy (Shields, 2018). Due to the financial privation, the Williamses were "conscious of the lack of money," a habit that is "involved with their identity (Shields, 2018: 27)" It is not conjectured to say that the author's family was, at one point, preoccupied with money and developed their mental habit accordingly.

There is an interesting shift indicated by a socio-economic transition felt by Stoner. The transition is marked by his transition from his family's rural farming environment to the urbanized university environment. Stoner is sent by his family to study Agriculture at the University of Missouri. He diverts his study to English Literature during his sophomore year after an epiphany.

Stoner is introduced to Sonnet 73 in one perfunctory class of the survey of English Literature. John Williams's choice of mentioning Sonnet 73 is interesting. The poem, in particular, has an existential tone to it (López, 1996). It discusses mortality, the meaninglessness of existence, and an optimism that despite all of that, life can still gain "a certain sense of purpose—not just by generation, childbearing" or through the immortality of poetry "but simply through the intensity and truthfulness of love; love towards the things that most deserve to be loved (López, 1996: 321)." The poem campaigns for a passion that unifies the cosmic forces of good (López, 1996: 321). The introduction of the poetry marks an awakening in Stoner's mind (Lezy, 2015; Shields, 2018). "The love of literature, of language, of the mystery of the mind and heart" begins to attract Stoner and he starts building confidence as he finds "in the blackest and coldest print—the love which he had hidden (Williams, 1965: 95)."

The author also went through a period of transition. His family experienced a dramatic shift of financial betterment in the 1930s. Williams's step-father, previously a post-office janitor, landed a better-paying job as a civil service worker (Shields, 2018). The economy improved for the Williamses that they were able to afford a house (Shields, 2018). Ten

years later, John Williams joined World War II which he was reluctant to be part of (Shields, 2018). He was placed in India. During his time serving, he received a promotion to be a sergeant but he had to endure malaria, scrub typhus, and a marshland disease that gave him fever and skin lesions (Shields, 2018). The effect of malaria plagued him even after his return from India (Shields, 2018). After his return, Williams decided to continue his study. Williams received his Doctorate from the University of Missouri, majoring in English Literature, where the setting of *Stoner* later took place. Williams then worked as a creative writing instructor at the University of Denver, where he remained on the staff of the writing program until his retirement in 1985 (Shields, 2018).

The main character's transition was common in America particularly around the early 20th century. Laborers in agriculture sectors started to decrease in number particularly in 1900 until 1930 (Dimitri, Effland, & Conklin, 2005). At the same time, urbanization was growing marked by almost 40 percent of the population moving towards 100 largest cities (Atack, Margo, & Rhode, 2022). The trend was influenced by the advancements of technology which replaced manual labor and allowed for easier mobilization (Dimitri et al., 2005; Gardner, 2009). America's newer generations decided to move out of the rural areas in favor of the cities (Boustan, Bunten, & Hearey, 2013; Rees, 2016). They occupied other niches and enterprises, and abandoned farming partially or fully (Dimitri et al., 2005).

Stoner comes from a social group which is constantly occupied with financial struggles. The experience shapes his stoical attitude. Upon conceiving education, he receives an epiphany. The epiphany marks the product of the modification of his world view. Stoner has transitioned from his farming environment to the university environment. Stoner finally acquires financial stability afforded by his job as a university instructor. As his view expands, Stoner learns the wisdom of pursuing a passion. The concept of passion corresponds with Camusian concept of passion.

Camus illustrates passion with a Spanish fictional character, Don Juan (Camus, 1965). Don Juan pledges his life to loving multiple women but he refuses commitment. The world generally stands on the basis of unitary unions such as a monogamous marriage but according to Camus, Don Juan's salvation

is perfectly reasonable (1965). Don Juan is motivated by his passion to love. The object of his passion is women. This passion explains any contradiction in his action; he loves women with the same force each time he meets one. As quoted from Camus's essay, "why should it be essential to love rarely in order to love much (1965: 45)?"

Don Juan sets off in his quest for love with full understanding of the social consequences (Camus, 1965). It is to be kept in mind that Camus's interpretation of Don Juan does not follow the line of common sense. Camus's interest is not in defending Don Juan's ridiculous behavior but in the art of living.

Chastise, referring to Godly and social punishment, is seen as part of the game. Don Juan accepts the social chastise of his vices as a fate, and according to Camus, fate is not a punishment (1965).

The following passage highlights the way that passion is depicted in *Stoner*.

In his youth he had given it freely, without thought; he had given it to the knowledge that had been revealed to him—how many years ago?—by Archer Sloane; he had given it to Edith, in those foolish days of his courtship and marriage; and he had given it to Katherine, as if it had never been given before. He had, in odd ways, given it to every moment of his life, and had perhaps given it most fully when he was unaware of his giving. It was a passion neither of the mind nor of the flesh; rather, it was a force that comprehended them both, as if they were but the matter of love, its specific substance. To a woman or to a poem it said simply: Look! I am alive (Williams, 1965: 200).

Passion in *Stoner* is viewed as an act of love, akin to the way that Camus defines passion. One of the objects of Stoner's passion is literature. This passion makes him a studious scholar. His quest in literary studies lands him a job as a university instructor. Stoner then finds passion in teaching. He commits himself to his job which he regards as "a happy exhaustion which he hoped never end (Williams, 1965: 199-200)." He dedicates his energy to his work and "hoped that he was at last defined by what he did (Williams, 1965: 200)." Stoner also finds passion for women. He falls in love with his wife, Edith Bostwick, which unfortunately makes him overlook his wife's unstable and abusive tendencies.

The main conflict in *Stoner* is marriage. The marital conflict sheds an interesting insight into the way that two people from different social classes interact.

"Edith has had—advantages—you know. A fine home, servants, the best schools. I'm wondering—I find myself afraid, with the reduced standard which would be inevitable with your—ah, condition—that... (Williams, 1965: 56)"

Edith comes from an upper-class family as suggested by the passage. Edith's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bostwick (The Bostwicks), are concerned about her well-being if she marries Stoner, a tenured professor of English Literature (Williams, 1965: 56). Mr. Bostwick describes the privileges he is able to provide for his daughter. He gives her a good house and servants which affords her leisure. Edith is an only child with "no knowledge of the necessity of living" because "she had never been alone to care for her own self one day of her life (Williams, 1965: 52)."

"I was very shy so my mother sent me to Miss Thorndyke's school for Girls in St. Louis. I was the youngest there but that was all right because daddy was a member of the board and he arranged it (Williams, 1965: 51)."

The passage above is an excerpt of Edith's dialogue with Stoner during their courtship. The Bostwicks provide Edith with quality schooling. She gains an easy access to the private school despite her young age because her father is one of the members of the school committee. These privileges, however, have turned Edith into a person with a stern insistence of preserving her comfort. John Williams writes in acknowledgement that Edith's raising is "typical of that of most girls of her time and circumstance ... Edith is raised to praise 'protection', referring to financial security, as "an almost sacred obligation (Williams, 1965: 51)."

The way the Bostwicks interact is interesting when compared to the Stoners. As explained earlier, the relationship between the Stoners is that of cooperation irrespective of gender while the division of roles in the Bostwicks' household is clearer. Mr. Bostwick works and provides while Mrs. Bostwick stays in the house and receives. The gender relation is that of financial dependency. From marriage,

Mrs. Bostwick expects 'some betterment' of her financial circumstances, but "the betterment had never been very precisely specified (Williams, 1965: 55)." Accustomed to expecting more, Mrs. Bostwick displays "dissatisfaction so habitual within her that it was part of her person (Williams, 1965: 55)." The dissatisfaction grows over time that it becomes "so general and pervasive that no specific remedy may assuage them (Williams, 1965: 55)."

She asked to borrow a sum of money from her mother, who made her an impetuous gift of it. She bought a new wardrobe, burning all the clothes she had brought with her from Columbia... (Williams, 1965: 98)

The event above depicts Edith's visit to her family's house. Edith burns the clothes she brings with her from Columbia, the house she shares with Stoner, to replace them with an entirely new wardrobe gifted by her mother. Through this, Edith announces to Stoner "a declaration of war (Williams, 1965: 96)." On another occasion, Edith begins to invite her aunt to the house to chat. Whenever Stoner arrives home from teaching, the two greet him politely but "they saw him with regret (Williams, 1965: 71)."

Edith's dissatisfaction is amplified in other instances. When Stoner finds that looking for a new job will better his career and work environment, Edith shows her fear of losing the minor security the family enjoys and begins to list the things that she finds valuable, which include "our home—our lovely home (Williams, 1965: 140)." She complains that Stoner is thoughtless and that the family have been poor so far (Williams, 1965: 140-141). This view, however, hinders her to see Stoner as an amiable husband, but rather, as an incompetent provider and enemy.

Stoner falls in love and has an affair with his student, Katherine Driscoll. They share one passion in literature which amplifies their love for each other. An affair is generally not a commendable act but Camus's definition of passion applies to the matter. Stoner's affair is not something lamentable because he follows his passion. In *Stoner*, passion is neither of the mind nor the flesh, and it is free from moral judgment. It is a harmony that unifies them. Passion concretizes Stoner's existence. It is a statement that he is simply alive.

A philosophical view and literary works are the translation of a worldview (Goldmann & Boelhower,

1980). A world view is a global awareness stemming from people's efforts to make sense of the world (Goldmann & Boelhower, 1980). People living under similar circumstances will develop similar world view (Goldmann & Boelhower, 1980). It is interesting to dissect further into how a similar existential world view emerged naturally in John Williams's novel and Camus's philosophy, keeping in mind that the two lived in different countries.

Albert Camus and John Williams came from similar social classes and experienced similar difficulties. Camus was born in 1913 in the city of Algiers, Algeria. John Williams was born nine years later in 1922. Camus's mother raised him alone after his father died in the Battle of the Marne during World War I (Cruickshank, 2022). John Williams also lost his father when he was a toddler (Shields, 2018). Similar to John Williams, Camus experienced living in poverty during his childhood. His family did not own a house. Camus lived in a modest apartment with his mother, brother, uncle and grandmother (Cruickshank, 2022). Despite the circumstances, Camus excelled in school and elevated his life. He, like John Williams, experienced a period of transition. Camus gained an access to study at the University of Algiers and broadened his knowledge in philosophy. He made a momentous career as a novelist. Camus won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 (Cruickshank, 2022). At the age of 25, Camus moved to Paris but his early days in Algeria remained to influence many of his works. Camus's life was cut short in 1960. He died in an automobile accident at the age of 47 (Simpson, 2022).

Camus and Williams loved literature. This passion is signified by their willingness to give literary legacies, many of which are in the form of novels. Camus wrote *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Fall* (1957), and *A Happy Death* (1972). Williams wrote *Nothing but The Night* (1948), *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), *Stoner* (1965), and *Augustus* (1972). Williams's passion for literature extended to reading, writing, and teaching. In one interview with Bryan Woolley, Williams said, "My God, to read something without joy is stupid (Woolley, 1985: 29)." Williams also loved and respected his job as an educator. He emphasized that a good teacher shall have "a genuine love for the subject, and respect for it (ibid)."

Camus and Williams developed similar mental attitudes and habits, taking into account the similarity in age and difficulties that they experienced in life. *The*

Myth of Sisyphus (1965) and *Stoner* (1965) are both discourses representing how people from their social class dealt with the questions of life.

Stoner leads a life of passion. The thoughts of failure, however, plague him before he dies. He dispassionately and reasonably life contemplates “the failure that his life must appear to be (Williams, 1965: 220).” This contemplation shall not be interpreted as an affirmation that Stoner has led a life of failure but rather, as a cohesive unit that signifies the integrity of his character.

He had wanted friendship and the closeness of friendship that might hold him in the race of mankind; he had had two friends, one of whom had died senselessly before he was known, the other of whom had now withdrawn so distantly into the ranks of the living that . . . He had wanted the singleness and the still connective passion of marriage; he had had that, too, and he had not known what to do with it, and it had died. He had wanted love; and he had had love, and had relinquished it, had let it go into the chaos of potentiality. Katherine, he thought. “Katherine.”

And he had wanted to be a teacher, and he had become one And what else? he thought. What else (Williams, 1965: 219-220)?

The passage signifies valuable matters for Stoner. He wants friendship, a good marriage, love, and respectable career. Despite the difficulties he faces in each matter, he achieves them: “he had had that” and “he had become one (Williams, 1965: 219-220).” Before Stoner dies, he finds closure. He answers his doubts by saying that his failures hardly matter to him anymore. In fact, such thoughts are “unworthy of what his life had been (Williams, 1965: 220).” Stoner holds a book that he authors. In that book he finds a piece of himself (Williams, 1965: 221). It does not matter for Stoner that the book serves no use and that it is forgotten because it has served its purpose for Stoner; it solidifies his existence. It says that he simply is ‘alive’ (Williams, 1965: 200).

Stoner loves every moment of his life. This wisdom leads him to a successful life. Stoner is a passionate scholar, teacher, lover, father, and friend. He is also a decent human being with vices which make his character more human. There are aspects in Stoner’s life which are considered to be failures

(Clark, 2017; Lezy, 2015). The author even said that Stoner endures and accepts too much but he does not fight enough (Shields, 2018). However, these are vices which signify his virtues (Shields, 2018). These virtues allow him to endure the difficulties of life (Shields, 2018: 160). In the last segments of the novel, Stoner finds a sense of fulfillment. His life may appear to be a failure; however, it needs to be kept in mind that Stoner’s life is a life well-lived. John Williams said in one of his interviews that he gave Stoner “more than he has had before, and more than any of us ever gain—his own identity (Shields, 2018).”

The author’s message is clear. John Williams communicates a specific world view; an existential wisdom. Through depicting the lives of poor farmers in America, he portrays the mental habits of poor farmers in America who lived in the 19th century. He also depicts a socio-economic transition which necessitates the transformation of the old tradition with the new wisdom of pursuing a passion in life.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Stoner* produces several findings that is summarized below. First poor farmers in the novel live under constant economic stress which shapes their existential mental habit. Despite this, they are indifferent to metaphysical questions. They develop an unaffected and stoical common ethic which epitomizes their identity as a social unit. As the time progresses, a socio-economic transition necessitates the transformation of the old mental habit. The main character learns the magnitude of leading a passionate life. Second, most Americans around the 19th century worked as farmers and many of these farmers were poor. Poverty shaped their existential mental habit. They developed a keen sense of self-reliance but lacked the time, means, and stimulus to be interested in philosophy or aesthetic and were therefore foreign to existential ideas. The 20th century brought fundamental changes in the lives of the Americans. People moved from rural areas to the city and were therefore confronted with different problems. In France, existentialism was rising. Existential ideas, particularly that of Camus, shares similar fundamental ideologies found in the novel, particularly the metaphysical concept and the concept of passion. Upon further investigation, Camus came from an impoverished family, similar to that of the

author. The third finding is the author's worldview. John William communicates a specific worldview; an existential wisdom which corresponds to Camusian existentialism. The worldview speaks of the need to continue an existential wisdom, the old ethics, and to replace the tradition with the new wisdom that is the need to seek passion in life.

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