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The Queer Plot of Stoner: Covert Homoeroticism in John Williams' Cult Academic Novel

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis posits a queer reading of John Williams' *Stoner*; in doing so, it employs close textual analysis and draws from various queer theoretical thinkers, including Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, and Lee Edelman. The overlapping field of disability studies also features heavily, specifically concerning the characters Charles Walker and Hollis Lomax. The thesis argues that *Stoner* can be read as a covertly queer love plot between the novel's protagonist (William Stoner) and his academic rival (Hollis Lomax), with Sedgwick's *Between Men* providing the most critical theoretical foundation *for* this argument and my own close readings of certain key textual moments constituting the evidential bulk *of* this argument.

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Queer theory, Queer studies, Disability Studies, John Williams, Homoeroticism, *Stoner*, Lee Edelman, Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam

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DEDICATION

For my father.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Relatively little scholarship exists on John Williams' *Stoner*, a novel which made barely a splash upon its publication in 1965 and seemed for some time destined to remain a footnote in American literary history. But readers and critics alike have more recently embarked on something of a "resurrection" ("You Should") of the once-overlooked *Stoner*—a project galvanized by popular *New York Times* pieces such as Steve Almond's 2014 "You Should Seriously Read *Stoner* Right Now" and Morris Dickstein's 2007 "The Inner Lives of Men," in which Dickstein rather (in)famously describes *Stoner* as "a perfect novel"—and, indeed, *Stoner* seems to have belatedly carved for itself a humble yet zealously revered position in the canon as a much-deserving piece of "Lazarus literature" (Maughan 16). The novel has also, at long last, managed to spark a bit of political critique—most notably, feminist scholar Elaine Showalter's *Washington Post* article, "Classic *Stoner*? Not So Fast"—and even, apparently, some critical fatigue (writes Drew Smith: "[I]t's time to observe a moratorium on all these articles telling bookish types that we've never heard of a book we've all been hearing about for years . . . *Stoner* has been rediscovered by anyone who would care about its rediscovery").

But in spite of *Stoner*'s newly enshrined cult status, the academy itself—perhaps ironically, given the book's subject matter—seems largely unconverted. Scholarship on *Stoner* is sparse and academic readings of the text rather monolithic. The titular William Stoner is largely presumed an everyman, an uncharismatic academic who doggedly devotes himself to his profession while his life—marked primarily by quiet personal suffering and unenviable career stagnation—and finally his death pass unremarkably; *Stoner* itself considered "an austere record of austere values" (Robson), i.e. an uber-traditionalist exercise in formal restraint, an exceedingly understated middle-finger to the popular postmodern texts and techniques of its historical milieu.

In the words of scholar Andrew Rowcroft: "William Stoner's endurance, passivity, and quiet interiority are markedly distinct from the postmodern pyrotechnics of more popular writers operating during this period" (10)—and Williams' skeletal style, of course, much the same. The critical meta narrative of *Stoner* remains more or less as *straight*forward and uncomplicated as it would apparently have us believe William Stoner himself to be.

*

The motivating question behind my thesis is simple: could *Stoner* be a queer text? I believe so, and I hope to complicate the dominant critical understanding of *Stoner* in order to radically rethink its political potential. I want to (re)read *Stoner* (and Stoner) as queer—in a number of senses—by taking careful note of certain textual gaps, omissions, allusions, and other such subtle textures of (semi-)signification.

In order to approach my queer reading of *Stoner*, I must lay out some theory crucial to my own interpretive lens. The thinker perhaps most essential to my thesis is queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose thoughtful investigation into male/male/female erotic triangles (as previously described by René Girard) and the homoeroticism of male rivalry in Western literary traditions will, in chapter three, come to underpin my queer reading of *Stoner*, a novel very much marked by male rivalry. In *Stoner*, of course, the apparent rivalry between protagonist William Stoner and his colleague Hollis Lomax has little to do with any female object of desire; the two characters are commonly understood to represent the dominant and seemingly antithetical factions of a modernizing English department, and their career-long rivalry undoubtedly captures, in miniature, the mid-20th century crisis point and shifting meta-narrative of "humanities" disciplines in the West. But I want to highlight one particular moment in the story —a drunken kiss between Lomax and Stoner's wife Edith ("as if on quiet impulse, he bent a little

and touched his lips to hers . . . It was the chastest kiss Stoner had ever seen" [Williams 98])—as a crucial and revelatory moment, a moment that definitively closes the channels of Sedgwick's erotic triangle and sets the stage for the novel's grand (queer) love plot. Though this queer narrative remains characteristically opaque, we catch, I think, discernible glimpses as it billows and shifts the textual "curtains."

Much of my queer reading of *Stoner* will also hinge on disability studies and some of the significant intersectional and psychoanalytic work done in the queer and disability studies communities, including Robert McRuer's crucial connection between compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness and Anna Mollow's work on disability and the death drive. Part of the reason a disability studies perspective is so crucial to my queer reading of *Stoner* is that I believe disability is coded in the text (and, historically, in much of dominant Western culture) as queer; Williams in particular seems to deploy physical disability to (visibly) signal or exteriorize a given character's (invisibly) non-conforming or perverse "interiority," self-perception, or coagulated desires/identifications, a strategy I will investigate with regards to Lomax's characterization in chapter one. However, I will be largely reading against (or at least significantly complicating) interpretations of Williams' use of disability as (in the vein of Chaucer, e.g.) a tidy ableist metaphor for "moral corruption," wickedness, or general malevolence.

I will also be incorporating selections from Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* in order to demonstrate that William Stoner himself may be read as a sociopolitically *queer* figure. Halberstam argues that failure is a characteristically "queer art," and that queer resistance often takes the forms of failure, quiet noncompliance, willful ineptitude, and various other negative affects or responses—for instance, the "radical form of masochistic passivity that offers

up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself" (131). I think anyone who has read *Stoner* cover-to-cover cannot fail to recognize Stoner's enduring "masochistic passivity," and I intend to explore the ways in which Stoner's life and choices embody the queer art of failure. Perhaps some would censure me for an attempt to claim an apparently straight, white, conservative male character written by an apparently straight, white, conservative male author as a queer and potentially resistive figure—and to be clear, my intention is not and has never been to erase any of John Williams' sins as a writer or human. But I also believe—whatever Williams may or may not have intended—that literature (and especially brilliant literature) cannot help but exceed, surpass, subvert, and even destroy its author's ideas, intentions, and personal limitations. And *Stoner*, I think, is a brilliant piece of literature. Williams' biography and politics may prove interesting and salient to other projects on his writing and life's work, but they are largely irrelevant to mine.

2 CHAPTER ONE: PERVERSION BY PROXY

Before I can properly demonstrate that *Stoner* might be read as a queer love plot, I must more fully explicate two points that will become essential to my argument: first, that John Williams deploys *visible* disability (or "abnormality") to signal *invisible* "abnormality" in the form of queer (i.e. taboo) desire; and second, that Williams habitually employs a slippery, metonymic logic of character and character relation in order to create intricate scenes and interactions that simultaneously generate multiple registers of meaning. Charles Walker, most notably, will often serve as a proxy for his mentor Hollis Lomax, and at certain particular junctures Edith will operate similarly for her husband Stoner. These points may not seem superficially related, but combined they constitute an essential foundation for my reading of *Stoner* as a (queer, opaque) love story between apparent rivals William Stoner and Hollis Lomax.

And so we may begin with Lomax:

> Someone whispered, "It's Lomax," and the sound was sharp and audible through the room.
>
> He had come through the door, closed it, and had advanced a few steps beyond the threshold, where he now stood. He was a man barely over five feet in height, and his body was grotesquely misshapen. A small hump raised his left shoulder to his neck, and his left arm hung laxly at his side. His upper body was heavy and curved, so that he appeared to be always struggling for balance; his legs were thin, and he walked with a hitch in his stiff right leg. For several moments he stood with his blond head bent downward, as if he were inspecting his highly polished black shoes and the sharp crease of his black trousers. Then he lifted his head and shot his right arm out, exposing a stiff

> white length of cuff with gold links; there was a cigarette in his long pale fingers. He took a deep drag, inhaled, and expelled the smoke in a thin stream. And then they could see his face.
>
> It was the face of a matinee idol. Long and thin and mobile, it was nevertheless strongly featured; his forehead was high and narrow, with heavy veins, and his thick waving hair, the color of ripe wheat, swept back from it in a somewhat theatrical pompadour. He dropped his cigarette on the floor, ground it beneath his sole, and spoke.
>
> "I am Lomax." He paused; his voice, rich and deep, articulated his words precisely, with a dramatic resonance. "I hope I have not disrupted your meeting." (Williams 93-94)

Perhaps, given this theatrical entrance and rather foppish characterization, few readers will require convincing that Lomax here is coded as queer. He hails from a Wildean lineage of high style, high drama, and high irony—we might recall his "gold links," "highly polished black shoes," and "theatrical pompadour"—and he reads generically as something of a Warhol or Capote type (though Lomax, in the mid-1920s, would more aptly be blazing those future trails). But few critics have examined the implicitly queer characterization of Lomax the Dandy, perhaps because this characterization is almost shockingly eclipsed by Williams' initial description of Lomax the Cripple. His body, we learn, is "grotesquely misshapen," language which can hardly be understood as neutral; perhaps tellingly, Steve Almond describes him as "half Cary Grant, half Quasimodo" (70). Given that Lomax eventually develops into an almost brutally antagonistic figure, it would be fairly easy to read a simple Chaucerian correlation between his "misshapen" body and an inherent sort of cruelty, a twisted or depraved morality—a correlation, of course, which in our contemporary moment could only be understood as a

damning indictment of *Williams* rather than of Lomax.[1] Still, in the haste of trying (and convicting) Williams for his apparent ableism, few have made note of the evident ways in which Lomax's physicality—his visible disability, what we might deem his *exteriority*—proves so tightly woven, in this earliest description, with an invisible but nonetheless gestured-toward interiority, one marked not so much by cruelty or vindictiveness as by unspeakably taboo (perverse, "misshapen") desire.[2]

Disability theorist Tobin Siebers, drawing on work by Barbara Waxman-Fiduccia, observes that "sex"—and specifically, reproductive sex—"bestows human status" (41). "[D]isability," he writes, "assumes the characteristic of a sexual perversion because disabled people are thought unable to produce 'quality offspring' ['Current' 168-169]. It is reproduction, then, that marks sexuality as a privileged index of human ability" (41). (The Marxists among us will undoubtedly notice the capitalist demand for [re]productivity at work.) And—in spite of pervasive "Poster Child" tropes and the oft-noted historical desexualization of disabled bodies—Siebers and Waxman-Fiduccia are far from the only thinkers to have perceived that, on some deeper level, disability often proves strangely entwined with *sexual perversion* in our collective imaginary (and indeed this link might even explain, psychoanalytically speaking, the popular

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[1] Elaine Showalter, for instance, writes: "This repeated portrayal of Stoner's antagonists [i.e. Lomax and Walker] as physically deformed is, perhaps, one of the novel's nastiest, most outdated strategies." While I take some issue with this shallow reading of Williams' "strategies," we can undoubtedly recognize the logic behind her implicit accusation of ableism—a not-unpopular take on Williams' treatment of the male antagonists in *Stoner*.

[2] And to clarify, I make no particular claims here as to whether or not Williams' use of disability as code or symbol—i.e. his apparent burdening of the disabled body, the disabled character, with an excess of *meaning*—is itself inherently ableist; I suspect many—quite fairly—would say that it is. Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, for instance, observes that "Western tradition posits the visible world as the index of a coherent and just invisible world, encouraging us to read the material body as a sign invested with transcendent meaning . . . [and] imbu[ing] any visual differences with significance that obscures the complexity of their bearers" (*Extraordinary* 11). Like the bodies of so many other complex disabled characters in the literary canon (*Richard III* in particular comes to mind), Lomax's constitutes a symbolic paradox; it overflows with "transcendent meaning"—demands over and again to be "read"—yet frustrates any singular interpretation, proves ultimately illegible (that is to say: human).

urge to "sanitize" disabled bodies). Riva Lehrer puts the matter artfully: "I will be one of the crip girls whose bodies scare the panel of judges [i.e. men on the street]. They are afraid that our unbalanced shapes hint of unsanctioned desires. On both sides of the bed" (234). Moreover, crip theorist Robert McRuer has famously elaborated on the systematic entanglement of "compulsory heterosexuality" (2) and "compulsory able-bodiedness" (2), noting that the social imperatives toward *proper* (hetero)sexuality and (abled) bodily comportment are mutually dependent, structurally entwined. Logically, his formula would also imply the mutual dependencies and entanglements of sexual and bodily *deviance*, non-conformity, etc. And, perhaps most radically, Anna Mollow suggests a sort of ontological inextricability between disability and sex itself, arguing that "sex 'is' disability . . . they could even be described as the same self-rupturing force. Psychoanalysis calls this force the death drive" (297). If, then, (dis)ability and sexuality are somehow so utterly bound up—if, at the very least, physical disability "assumes the characteristic of a sexual perversion" in the subtext of our cultural *logos* —does it not stand to reason that disability might be deployed in literature as an exteriorization *of*, a visible signal *for* sexual perversion (and, specifically, for queer or characteristically non- reproductive sexualities)? I do not purport that every disabled character in the literary canon should be read as queer, but in this case I believe these much-noted affinities between disability and queer sexualities—the imagined perversion "always already" haunting disabled bodies— may help clarify and bolster our hypothesis that Lomax should be understood as a fundamentally queer figure; his disability functions, in *Stoner*, as a sort of coded text by and through which we might also read his queerness. We may even go so far as to note that Lomax's visible disability operates as something of a mirror—not revealing the character's corrupt essence, no, nor cataloguing (*a la* Dorian Gray) sundry secret misbehaviors, but a proper mirror, one *reflecting*

his society's projections and fears, the "grotesque" perversions and threat to the symbolic order perpetually imagined in, ascribed *to* the queer body, to (the body wracked/wrecked with) queer desire.

To take Roland Barthes wildly out of context: "You address yourself to me so that I may read you" (*Pleasure* 5). He is speaking, literally, to/of a text, but with Lomax's grand entrance in mind I want to broaden Barthes' notion (and our notion) of *text* here. Do we not, after all, address ourselves always *to be read*? And how then might we read Lomax's entrance—his address—to his colleagues, and (implicitly) to us, his readers/voyeurs? It brims, clearly, with irony: "I hope I have not interrupted your meeting," when he knows he has done exactly that. And, compounding the effect of the irony, it is grammatically distancing: "*your* meeting," as if he too is not a faculty member, one of *them*, expected at the very same meeting. If the earnest address asks to be read straight, the ironic address asks to be read slant; it renders the speaker himself a fraught, multivalent text. Interestingly enough, a cultivated and frequently wielded sense of irony proves one of Lomax's defining traits; Williams deploys the adverb "ironically" more than once to describe Lomax's behavior and general affect ("ironically pleasant;" "ironically polite and impersonal" [95]). Irony is a fundamentally queer mode ("the queerest of rhetorical devices," according to Edelman, who notes that irony "carries a charge . . . quite similar to that of the death drive" [23]), and it is queer precisely in its symbolic cleavage, its inhering discordance, its characteristic (*self*-)destruction. Irony creates, at minimum, two (conflicting) registers of meaning: the literal register of what is said or done, and the implied register counter to what is said or done. Irony brackets itself in quotation marks; it subverts the symbolic from within the symbolic, unspooling legibility—the (seeming) coherence of literality—by proliferating excess and discordant *meaning*. Irony sullies, crawls inside the "clean and

proper body" (Kristeva 72) of the sign to speak—to perform—the unspeakable.[3] We can see, then, that Lomax's ironic address (with which, here, he simultaneously cloaks and reveals his disdain for his colleagues) in fact mirrors—and we find, so often, a mirroring sort of logic within *Stoner*—the speaking yet unspeakable, the shrouded yet pointedly signaled nature of his own (queer) desire.[4]

*

We will return eventually to the question of Lomax's queer desire, but for now I would like to shift focus to his student and protégé, Charles Walker. I have claimed that *Stoner* hinges often upon a logic of mirroring, and we see one such instance of this mirroring play out in the figure of Walker, who so often reflects—or, perhaps more aptly, parodies (for his is something of a funhouse reflection)—the figure of his academic advisor. Walker's first uncomfortably late entrance into Stoner's graduate seminar apes Lomax's dramatic entrance into the faculty meeting; his affectations also tend to mimic Lomax's ("He [Walker] held a cigarette negligently in his right hand" [168]), not to mention that the only successful portion of his oral examination appears to be some parroted version of Lomax's own research (158-161). But of course, Lomax and Walker also share a rather more visibly striking similarity, which Williams lays out plainly upon Walker's first introduction:

> A figure shuffled out of the darkness of the hall into the light of the room. Stoner blinked sleepily against the dimness, recognizing a student whom he had noticed in the halls but did not know. The young man's left arm hung stiffly at his side, and his left foot dragged

[3] Not to put too fine a point on this, but to clarify with a rather simple example: the waitress cannot directly say "fuck you" to a rude customer (and expect to keep her job); she can, however, say "*thank you*"—laced with irony—to a similar, if perhaps slightly less gratifying, effect.

[4] Regarding queer desire, we may recall the famous line penned by Alfred Lord Douglas: "the love that *dare not speak* its name" ("Two Loves," emphasis mine).

> as he walked. His face was pale and round, his horn-rimmed eyeglasses were round . . . (133)

Both, in short, are disabled.[5] Williams' description here, though certainly not identical, proves strikingly similar to that first description of Lomax, down even at one juncture to the precise wording ("left arm hung" [93, 133]). The language appears perhaps more neutral than what is deployed in that first description of Lomax, but we ought not let that early neutrality obscure the spectacle that Walker is soon made into:

> A loud noise had interrupted him. The door had opened and Charles Walker entered the room; as he closed the door the books he carried under his crippled arm slipped and crashed to the floor. He bent awkwardly, his bad leg extended behind him, and slowly gathered his books and papers. Then he drew himself erect and shuffled across the room, the scrape of his foot across the bare cement raising a loud and grating hiss that sounded sibilantly hollow in the room. (138)

If this passage elicits a certain "cringe" reaction, it is because we are made to keenly feel each lengthy moment of the classroom's focused gaze on Charles Walker's body. We become subjectively divided: forced simultaneously to experience Walker's objectification (as empathetic readers) and to participate in that same objectification (as complicit voyeurs). The abled gaze and long history of disability as spectacle (e.g. the once-popular "freak show") have been much theorized, but as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson succinctly puts it: "The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display" ("Politics" 56). Williams makes clear that both Lomax and Walker are on display. But there is a crucial difference between their entrances, a difference which explains our vastly different affective

[5] And while I don't know about "Lomax," there certainly seems to be some cruel irony in the naming of Charles "Walker"—though I suppose he does, at least, "walk away" from his abysmal oral examination unscathed.

responses: Lomax, with his deliberate dramatic flair, *puts himself* on display; he subverts his assigned role by "playing it up" —performing ironically for his already assumed audience—and thus superficially satisfies yet more fundamentally evades the voyeuristic demands of the abled gaze. Walker, lacking Lomax's social sophistication and highly disciplined bodily comportment, finds himself pinned by its full objectifying force. And so a moment that for an able-bodied student might seem to constitute a minor embarrassment (arriving to class late, dropping one's books) becomes inextricably bound up with the spectacle of Walker's disabled body and carries a heavier—we might say more meaningful(l) or *burdened*—symbolic resonance.

Anna Mollow notes that "disability, along with irony and queerness, might be another name for what Edelman calls 'the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order' [*No Future* 25]" (294). Indeed, we might go so far as to say that physical disabilities, "extraordinary bodies" (*Extraordinary* 7) like Walker's and Lomax's, constitute an "impolite" *irruption* of the real—a break in the social legibility of the body, a mark of abjection or non*sense*. This focus on the abled gaze levelled at Lomax and Walker may seem somewhat tangential to my point that Williams employs a slippery logic of character—a logic by which Walker comes at times to stand in for Lomax himself—but I believe it is essential that we fully grasp both the depths of these characters' ontological alignment and the distinguishing nuances regarding *how* each engages with his particular, marked subject position. Walker, as mentioned, often seems to parody Lomax; he haunts the figure of his advisor with the perpetual threat of ridiculousness (i.e. vulnerability to ridicule), and so functionally at various points in the narrative becomes both proxy *for* Lomax and revelation *of* Lomax—that is, a sort of Freudian slip or "tell" of Lomax's own generally well-cloaked vulnerabilities and insecurities (we may recall the house party where Lomax, drunk, "told, as if of another person, of the isolation that his deformity had forced upon

him, of the early shame which had no source that he could understand" [Williams 100]).[6] This point will become particularly salient when we more closely investigate the scene of Charles Walker's oral examination and its complex, multivalent, reverberating implications for the covertly queer relationship between Hollis Lomax and William Stoner.

[6] And we might find it interesting to note—in light of this particular tendency of Walker's to reveal Lomax's vulnerabilities—that, while Lomax's sexuality is never overtly discussed in the text, the one moment in which this topic is obliquely speculated upon occurs between Gordon Finch and William Stoner, shortly after a heated conflict with Lomax concerning Walker's oral examinations: "Finally Finch said, 'I wonder what it is between him and Walker.' / Stoner shook his head. 'It isn't what you're thinking,' he said. 'I don't know what it is. I don't believe I want to know.' " That Finch is implying the possibility of a (homo)sexual relationship between Lomax and Walker seems evident, but Stoner's response proves something of a puzzle: exonerating and damning all at once. This moment may constitute Williams' most obvious gesture toward the possibility of a *queer* Lomax—of queer characters, queer relationships in general—and though Stoner seems to speak for Williams when insisting with strange authority that the relationship between Lomax and Walker "isn't what [we're] thinking," it is nonetheless Walker who functions as this "tell."

3 CHAPTER TWO: "CUT OUT FOR FAILURE"

It may require little stretch of the imagination for us to read Hollis Lomax as queer, but the same likely can't be said of his academic rival and Williams' protagonist, William Stoner, who on first glance would certainly seem to play the "straight man" and foil to the more evidently twisted figure of Lomax. Still, I want to argue that a particularly queer strain *does* inflect (inflict) Stoner's own life story—that Stoner himself repeatedly (if unconsciously) demonstrates certain queer affinities—and that we ought not too quickly assume that only the villains in *Stoner* might prove in any way deviant. By a somewhat upside-down logic, then, I want to pursue my argument for a "queer Stoner" not, first and foremost, by "revealing" his repressed sexual desire for Lomax (although eventually, in a way, *yes*), but rather by exploring his life and work as politically or socially queer, with the help of Jack Halbertam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. Which is, of course, to say: William Stoner is a failure.

Let us recall the first lines of *Stoner:*

> William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library . . .
>
> An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was 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 . . . (1)

From the novel's outset, we can hold no hopes that Stoner's career will prove in any sense illustrious. But it's not only Stoner's career that ultimately constitutes—at least by typical societal measures—a failure. His marriage to Edith can hardly be described as anything but miserable ("Within a month he knew that his marriage was a failure; within a year he stopped hoping that it would improve" [75]), and over the years Stoner quietly submits to his unhappy wife's various domestic onslaughts. His once-treasured relationship with his daughter Grace falls apart in her early childhood—a casualty of Stoner's passivity and Edith's guerrilla marital warfare—and Grace herself eventually fades into a sad, ghostlike adulthood. Even Stoner's love affair with Katherine Driscoll comes to a cruel, untimely end when Lomax discovers their relationship and Katherine must leave the university in order to salvage her career and reputation. In short, very little in Stoner's public or private life might be said to "go right" or be deemed, by standard definitions, *successful*. In the words of his friend Dave Masters, William Stoner is "cut out for failure" (30).

Not all instances of failure are necessarily *queer*, but I believe that Stoner as a character exemplifies what Halberstam calls "the queer art of failure" (88)—particularly that "radical form of masochistic passivity that . . . offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself" (131). I imagine few who have read the novel can overlook Stoner's characteristic "masochistic passivity"; Steve Almond, for instance (and perhaps only half-jokingly), refers to him as a "hardcore masochist" (158) and notes that Stoner's "martyrdom arises from a bottomless well of masochism" (93), citing lines such as Stoner's final conversation with his daughter Grace:

> "Poor Daddy, things haven't been easy for you, have they?"
>
> He thought for a moment and then he said, "No. But I suppose I didn't want them to be." (Williams 280)

And so perhaps it does not take a psychoanalyst to identify Stoner's masochistic tendencies. Halberstam writes:

> Freud . . . refers to masochism as a form of femininity and a kind of flirtation with death; masochism, he says, is a byproduct of the unsuccessful repression of the death instinct to which a libidinal impulse has been attached . . . [S]ometimes libidinal energies are given over to destabilization, unbecoming, and unraveling. This is what Leo Bersani refers to as "self-shattering" . . . If taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency. (136)

To put it simply: Stoner seems to possess an unusually strong (i.e. poorly repressed) death drive— a feminine tendency toward self-destruction or "unbecoming"—which may align him politically with Halberstam's (characteristically queer) "anarchic refusal of coherence." And, to continue citing Halberstam citing others:

> [F]or Edelman the queer is always and inevitably linked to the death drive; indeed, death and finitude are the very meaning of queerness, if it has meaning at all, and Edelman uses this sense of the queer in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive, heteronormative politics of hope . . . (106)

Or, in Edelman's own words, "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9); the queer insists upon "the primacy of a constant *no* in response to the law of the Symbolic, which would echo that law's foundational act, its self-constituting negation" (5) and "figure[s] the bar to every

realization of futurity" (4). More bluntly, the *queer* is inherently and perversely "hopeless" (5). Perhaps the apparent hopelessness of *Stoner* (and Stoner) will seem insufficient in itself for the inference of a proper queer pedigree, and so I want to briefly investigate two particular failures of Stoner's that most explicitly subvert (literally and figuratively) the sociosymbolic imperative toward "*reproductive futurism*" (2, emphasis mine): his daughter, and his book.

We should begin with Grace, who may constitute Stoner's most apparent failure as well as *Stoner*'s most obvious challenge to reproductive futurism. Because Edith cannot handle the physical and emotional toil of motherhood,[7] it is Stoner who looks after Grace in her early childhood:

> Even at birth Grace was a beautiful child . . . She seldom cried, and she seemed almost aware of her surroundings. William fell instantly in love with her . . . And he was more nearly a mother than a father to his daughter. He changed her diapers and washed them; he chose her clothing and mended it when it was torn; he fed her and bathed her and rocked her in his arms . . . So for the first year of her life, Grace Stoner knew only her father's touch, and his voice, and his love. (88-89)[8]

Stoner maintains his role as primary caretaker for several years as Grace grows older; she often plays quietly in his study while he writes or conferences with students (103, 113), and when she is six years old he even installs "a small desk and chair for her, so that she had a place to read and do her homework" (122).

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[7] And we might briefly note that Edith's ill-equipped state is most sensitively (and, I think, most accurately) read as some messy and fraught combination of past trauma, mental illness, and the burden of heteronormative/nuclear-family isolation—not flippancy, callousness, or "hysteria."

[8] We might notice that it is most often around Grace, especially during her early childhood, when Stoner becomes "William"—first-name references generally reserved for the female characters of *Stoner*. The gesture is softening, suited to his nurturing role.

> At night, when Stoner put her to bed and returned to his study, he was aware of her absence from his room and was comforted by the knowledge that she slept securely above him. In ways of which he was barely conscious he started her education, and he watched with amazement and love as she grew before him and as her face began to show the intelligence that worked within her. (114)

Then, of course, Edith lays claim to her role as Grace's mother, removing her from Stoner's study and effectively his life—a "surprise attack" (125) which then becomes "a strategy that disguised itself as love and . . . thus one against which he was helpless" (125):

> "Grace," she said distinctly and slowly, "your father is trying to work. You mustn't disturb him."
>
> For several moments William and his daughter were so stunned by this sudden intrusion that neither of them moved or spoke. Then William managed to say, "It's all right, Edith. She doesn't bother me."
>
> As if he had not spoken, Edith said, "Grace, did you hear me? Come out of there this instant."
>
> Bewildered, Grace got down from her chair and walked across the room. In the center she paused, looking first at her father and then at her mother. Edith started to speak again, but William managed to cut her off.
>
> "It's all right, Grace," he said as gently as he could. "It's all right. Go with your mother." (124)

It is these words—"Go with your mother''—that initiate Grace's downward spiral. Soon, "Grace's already slender body was becoming thinner . . . [and] the expression that had once been quietly serene was now either faintly sullen at one extreme or gleeful and animated at the thin

edge of hysteria; she seldom smiled any more" (127). As Edith asserts more and more influence over her daughter's life and daily activities, Grace and her father grow distant and awkward with each other. Eventually, Grace becomes pregnant out-of-wedlock during her freshmen year of college—a seemingly desperate sort of attempt to escape her mother's clutches—and then enters a loveless marriage with the father of her child, who is shortly thereafter killed in World War II. She cedes custody of her son to his paternal grandparents and spends most of her adulthood drinking to cope:

> And Stoner came to realize that she was, as she had said, almost happy with her despair; she would live her days out quietly, drinking a little more, year by year, numbing herself against the nothingness her life had become. He was glad she had that, at least; he was grateful that she could drink. (257)

I reiterate the deeply sad story of Grace so thoroughly here to make a few distinct but somewhat entangled points. First—and momentarily putting aside the gender-bending Oedipal mess of Stoner's being "more nearly a mother than a father"—we can see that Stoner largely proves a failure as a parent. He cannot protect his daughter from the trauma she incurs at the hands of her mother, can hardly maintain even a simple relationship with her once Edith takes an interest in parenting, and the consequences of his abandonment ripple throughout the remainder of her quietly tragic life. I don't intend to imply that all parents who do a poorish job at raising their children are participating in some sort of queer politics, but within the logic of *Stoner* it's fair enough to say that Grace most obviously and literally figures the *Child*,[9] its insistent optimism and demand on a politics of futurity. And Stoner abandons that C/child, leaves her to

[9] That is, the "Child" which urges us "to embrace our own futurity . . . [and] imagine each moment as pregnant . . . with a meaning whose presence would fill up the hole in the Symbolic—the hole which marks . . . the place of the Real" (Edelman 15).

languish in a hopeless and meaningless existence ("the nothingness her life had become"). Which leads us, somewhat obliquely, to my next related point: that Stoner's general failure as a parent also constitutes a particular failure as a *father*. I don't necessarily mean this in the Freudian sense, and certainly not in the sense that his nurturing Grace and taking on of "motherly" duties engenders some consequential deficit of *masculine* authority, etc. I mean that Stoner is a failure as a father because he is a failure as *the* Father—the symbol, here, of the symbolic: subjectifier, arbiter of meaning. (We may recall: "In ways of which he was barely conscious he started her education.") Stoner's words "go to your mother" might translate into the language of Lacan as something like "return to the real"—a directive *counter* to the symbolic order, a "command" (or temptation) to *lose* meaning, sense, self. And so those words mark Stoner's F/fatherly failure to subjectify Grace, to install the Child, the future, *meaningfully* through and within the symbolic. At that moment, then, Stoner becomes for Grace the voice of an unrepressed death drive, urging her away from meaning—legibility—and into, instead, the womblike, senseless, undifferentiated real. We see the echo of this same story play out in Grace's adult life as she effectively abandons her son to be raised by his paternal grandparents. Instead of the "natural" and insistently hopeful logic of reproductive futurism—a logic by which the Child both bestows and inherits meaning through a perpetual deferral of the *now*—we witness, in *Stoner*, something of a senseless and perversely bleak *presentism*, in which the C/child can neither bestow meaning (unto the parent) nor be made *to* mean (by the parent). Williams' stark refusal to pursue hope through heredity lays bare the emptiness of the symbolic ("at the heart of the signifying border, the empty and arbitrary letter" [10]), the inhering meaninglessness of the reproductive (and signifying) chain(s). Neither Stoner nor *Stoner*

ultimately proves "psychically invested in preserving the familiar familial narrativity of reproductive futurism" (17)—quite the contrary. And in that, they are indeed rather queer.

But I would like to examine one more "failure" of Stoner's that I believe also challenges the narrative of reproductive futurism: his book. Writes Williams:

> He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure—as if it mattered . . .
>
> His head turned. His bedside table was piled with books that he had not touched for a long time. He let his hand play over them . . . It was his own book that he sought, and when the hand held it he smiled at the familiar red cover that had for a long time been faded and scuffed.
>
> It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial. He did not have the illusion that he would find himself there, in that fading print; and yet, he knew, a small part of him that he could not deny *was* there . . .
>
> He opened the book; and as he did so it became not his own. He let his fingers riffle through the pages and felt a tingling, as if those pages were alive. The tingling came through his fingers and coursed through his flesh and bone; he was minutely aware of it, and he waited until it contained him, until the old excitement that was like terror fixed him where he lay. The sunlight, passing through his window, shone upon the page, and he could not see what was written there.
>
> The fingers loosened, and the book they had held moved slowly and then swiftly across the still body and fell into the silence of the room. (288, emphasis his)

These lines constitute the final passages of *Stoner*, as well as the final moments of the life of William Stoner. Though we will likely recognize much earlier in the novel that Stoner's book is

destined for obscurity, it's crucial that Williams reminds us so keenly of this fact ("the book was forgotten and served no use") on Stoner's deathbed. The parallels between the book and Stoner's life are obvious, but the fate of the book here represents more than Stoner's own quick slide into obscurity (as foretold in those earliest paragraphs); it challenges—like Grace—the very logic of futurity. A book, of course, is figuratively something of a child, birthed in and through language in the hopes of carrying *forward* some "transcend[ent]" meaning.[10] And here Williams insists not upon any value or meaning produced or conveyed by the book—its text, that is—but rather on the book's "trivial[ity]," its ultimate incoherence ("he could not see what was written there"). Like Stoner in death, the book is returned to dust, emptied of meaning and reduced entirely to its materiality, its very thingness.[11] The book's falling "into the silence of the room" not only marks Stoner's return to the real—his lost *grasp* on the symbolic—but in fact destroys any hope that Stoner (if only the "small part of him that . . . *was* there" in the book) might meaningfully "live on" through the medium of his text. The book will exist until it eventually decays, one senseless object among many. I don't want to claim that there is absolutely no thread of hope or redemption to be found in the novel—such, I think, would be an insensitive, inaccurate reading—but I will certainly posit that, in *Stoner,* there is effectively no *future*

[10] And especially *Stoner*; when Stoner first publishes the book, after all, Williams writes that "he had held it in his hands and caressed its plain wrapper and turned its pages. It seemed delicate and alive, like a child" (104).

[11] Perhaps ironically, it is at the very moment that the book loses its meaning and joins Stoner in a return to materiality that it seems once again to fleetingly come alive ("as if those pages were alive"). We might read this as a Woolfian "moment of being" (78) or a sort of mystical *jouissance*—a sudden shattering of the symbolic (neatly figured as the text, its legibility)—through which Stoner, in surrendering to meaninglessness and imminent death, accesses a more vivid and immediate *reality*. Or we might read it as the strangely firing synapses of a dying man's brain. Either way, the moment hinges not on the book's transcendent value but, to the contrary, on its ultimate incoherence, its meaninglessness.

4 CHAPTER THREE: THE QUEER PLOT OF *STONER*

We arrive now at the beating heart of my perverse reading of *Stoner.* And though I think we generally do best to consider "queer" more nearly a verb than an adjective or noun—at least in any static sense—I do hope to have demonstrated that both William Stoner and his rival Hollis Lomax might not unfairly be thought of as *queer* figures. And so I hope now it will not seem an entirely absurd leap when I posit my next intention: to read, with some help from Eve Sedgwick, several key moments in the novel, moments superficially structured by academic rivalry, as in fact constituting a covertly queer love plot between Stoner and Lomax.

In the first chapter of *Between Men*, Sedgwick briefly describes a schematization of erotic triangles in literature previously laid out by René Girard. "What is most interesting for our purposes," she writes,

> is his [Girard's] insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved . . . In fact, Girard seems to see the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved. And within the male-centered novelistic tradition of European high culture, the triangles Girard traces are most often those in which two males are rivals for a female; it is the bond between males that he most assiduously uncovers. (21)

Lomax and Stoner, of course, would hardly seem to constitute "erotic rival[s]"—unless, perhaps, we want to take with some perverse extremity their mutual passion for literature (which, given Williams' occasionally sexualized language around the subject, might not be so terribly unfair).[12]

[12] For instance: "The love of literature, of language, of the mystery of the mind and heart showing themselves in the minute, strange, and unexpected combinations of letters and words . . . the love which he had hidden as if it were

Still, since literature may seem a somewhat abstract subject around which to constitute an "erotic rivalry," I do want to demonstrate that Williams in fact creates a concrete male-male-female erotic triangle in *Stoner*; he does so fleetingly, and certainly not in the traditional sense that would lead to Stoner and Lomax "fighting" for any period of time over a particular woman. But, using Stoner's wife Edith, Williams explicitly marks the erotic undercurrent between Stoner and Lomax, and by means of triangulation through an acceptable female object—a conductor, we might say—he closes the *circuit* of desire between the two men:

> They talked till nearly four in the morning; and though they drank more, their talk grew quieter and quieter, until at last no one spoke at all. They sat close together amid the debris of the party, as if on an island, huddling together for warmth and assurance. After a while Gordon and Caroline Finch got up and offered to drive Lomax to his rooms. Lomax shook Stoner's hand, asked him about his book, and wished him success with it; he walked over to Edith, who was sitting erect on a straight chair, and he took her hand; he thanked her for the party. Then, as if on a quiet impulse, he bent a little and touched his lips to hers; Edith's hand came up lightly to his hair, and they remained so for several moments while the others looked on. It was the chastest kiss Stoner had ever seen, and it seemed perfectly natural. (100-101)

Briefly putting aside that Lomax and Stoner "sat close together . . . huddling together for warmth," I would like to investigate the moment of this strange, chaste kiss between Lomax and

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illicit and dangerous, he [Stoner] began to display" (115); interestingly, Stoner's approach to literature in the early years of his career mirrors, historically, *queer love*: "illicit and dangerous," a love which must be "hidden" from the world. Later, about Stoner's affair with Katherine Driscoll, Williams writes: "They had been brought up in a tradition that told them in one way or another that the life of the mind and the life of the senses were separate and, indeed, inimical; they had believed, without ever having really thought about it, that one had to be chosen at some expense of the other. That the one could intensify the other had never occurred to them . . . it seemed a discovery that belonged to them alone" (205); here we see intellectual pursuits not distinguished *from* but inflected and informed *by* sexual desire (and vice-versa).

Edith. The punctuation here performs an interesting sort of function; a semicolon leads us from Lomax shaking Stoner's hand and wishing him luck with his book to taking *Edith's* hand and thanking her for the party. It reiterates the (already implied) connection between Stoner and Edith and moves the sentence forward as something of a declension from one to the next, subtly reminding us that the two are, structurally speaking, each one part of a (sanctioned) unit; that, by a sort of marital commutative property, their mathematical "orders" might occasionally be shifted with no change to the larger symbolic equation. And it is this reminder that presages the kiss: the quiet moment—the crucial juncture—that closes the erotic triangle of Lomax, Stoner, and Edith, and signals, through Edith, the current of queer desire running between Stoner and Lomax.

The kiss creates a compelling paradox because, on the one hand, a kiss directly on the mouth between two adults operates, in Western culture, as immensely common shorthand for *desire*, but on the other hand this particular kiss is described as "the chastest kiss Stoner had ever seen." This language of chastity here proves fascinating and a bit opaque; taken at face value, we might—rather ungenerously—deem it a sort of ableist desexualization of Lomax; i.e., we as readers might infer Williams to assume—or worse, wrongly assume ourselves—that a disabled body either *could* not or *should* not be considered sexually desirable, or a disabled person capable of desire. However, I think it far more likely that this kiss comes off as so particularly chaste not because Lomax has been unfairly desexualized, but rather because he himself harbors no desire for Edith; he is, after all, heavily coded as gay.[13] Yet if the kiss itself appears chaste—again, quite logical if we choose to read Lomax as someone who desires, exclusively, men—

[13] And, while this is admittedly far outside the scope of my thesis, I do think there are some compelling arguments to be made for a (repressed) lesbian or even asexual Edith—or better yet, to put identity in the backseat, an Edith decidedly uninterested in *men* (understandings which would, of course, only reinforce the "chast[ity]" of this kiss).

what it *signals* is anything but: a longing not for Edith, but for her husband; a sexual yearning channeled through and made visible *by* chaste action; a shrouded gesture, a gift that cannot be given to Stoner and so is shifted, obliquely, to his wife, to Edith, as she sits "erect on a straight chair" in some muddled parody of upright heterosexuality and phallic imagery. The kiss, indeed, is achingly sincere and at the same time almost totally ironic: it reveals that which dare not be spoken (desire for a man) in a grammar intended, formally, to indicate its opposite (kissing a woman). Lomax appropriates the language of heterosexual courtship here, sullies its "clean and proper body" (Kristeva 72) with queer desire, and he does so—wonderfully, confusingly, paradoxically, perfectly—by giving Edith "the chastest kiss Stoner had ever seen."

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And so what I would like to do now is to read a series of loosely connected moments in light of this kiss as the signal, the formal closure of an erotic triangle that in fact bonds Lomax and Stoner and gestures toward an otherwise hidden current of desire between the two men. Let us briefly turn, then, to Stoner's earliest considerations of Lomax, before even the housewarming party and uncanny kiss:

> William Stoner wished to know him better, but he did not know how to do so . . . It was some time before Stoner recognized the source of his attraction to Hollis Lomax. In Lomax's arrogance, his fluency, and his cheerful bitterness, Stoner saw, distorted but recognizable, an image of his friend Dave Masters. He wished to talk to him as he had talked to Dave; but he could not . . . He knew what he wished was impossible, and the knowledge saddened him. (95)

We see, of course, that these early impressions are charged with "attraction," an attraction moreover tinged with yearning and sadness for Stoner's inability to act on it ("what he wished

was impossible"). And Stoner's explanation for the attraction—that in Lomax in he sees "distorted but recognizable, an image of his friend Dave Masters"—opens an interesting point of comparison between Lomax, visibly disabled, and Masters, who quips that the University "is an asylum or—what do they call them now—a rest home, for the infirm" (29), ranking both himself and Stoner among the "infirm" and saying: "It is for us that the University exists, the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, nor for the selfless pursuit of knowledge" (31). Stoner recollects this speech years later, when discussing Lomax and Walker with his friend Gordon Finch: "Stoner looked across the room, out of the window, trying to remember. 'The three of us were together, and he said—something about the University being an asylum, a refuge from the world, for the dispossessed, the crippled. But he didn't mean Walker.' " (172). Funnily enough, Masters himself never uses the word "crippled"; this seems to be Stoner's inference, the explicit linkage between the extraordinary bodies of Walker and Lomax and the population for whom, according to Masters, the University in fact exists.

In one of the more compelling readings of Lomax's disability I've yet encountered, Eric Leuschner writes: "Disability . . . serves, in Mitchell's terms, as a social critique, 'a metaphor for things gone awry with [. . .] social orders' [24-5] . . . Such is the case with Williams' *Stoner* as Hollis Lomax's crippled body becomes a metaphor for unscholarly practices [afflicting the university at large]" (351). He also notes that Lomax's "disabled body, with echoes of Richard III and Byron, contrasts with his [conventionally handsome] face . . . The contrast is in keeping with his academic specialization, the Romantic poets, but is [also] a sign of peculiar academic duplicity" (341), and with regards to Masters' observation that the University is best understood as an "asylum" for the "infirm," he argues that

> Williams excludes Lomax and Walker from Masters' summation because their infirmity is on the surface only . . . They bring the real world into the green world of the university. As the novel shows, Stoner's disability is inherent—it is his idealism . . . His virtue places him on the abnormal side . . . (342)

Although I do take some issue with Leuschner's reading here, particularly the tidy inversion of Lomax's "surface" disability into Stoner's "inherent" one, the connection between Lomax's body and the nature of the university (at least according to the brilliant cynic Dave Masters) proves nonetheless crucial. *Stoner* takes place during a massively transitory period in literature departments across the English-speaking world, and Stoner's rivalry with Lomax is often understood to be a microcosm of the conflict between the emerging "camps" in literary studies, or "types" of English professor. Writes Gerald Graff: "It is in this period [1915-1950] that scholar and critic emerge as antithetical terms, and the gulf further widens between facts and value, investigation and appreciation, scientific specialization and general culture" (122). While I hesitate to too-neatly assign Stoner and Lomax the roles of "scholar" and/or "critic," we can certainly see how their differing approaches (and Lomax's eventual ascendancy) reflect greater trends in mid-twentieth century English departments. Stoner, a Medievalist and traditionalist, stresses the importance of a broad knowledge of literary history, including Classical grammar and philology. Lomax, a Romanticist and something of a proto-theorist (with perhaps—I can only guess—New Critical tendencies), seems to favor close-readings, culturally informed analyses, and ideas-based approaches.[14] And so it would be easy enough to write off the latter camp as fundamentally flawed—narrow, *twisted*—in, at least, the eyes of the novel(ist) based on

[14] Since we never actually get to witness Lomax teach in *Stoner*, this is largely conjecture based on Walker's preliminary oral examinations and the text's implication that Walker is heavily influenced by— perhaps to the point of parroting—his advisor.

its association with the purportedly monstrous figure of Lomax. But I believe to do this would require ignoring Williams' more nuanced connections between Lomax and Stoner's much-admired friend Dave Masters, as well as between Lomax's body and the university itself. After all, how can we consider the university a "green world" into which Lomax and Walker usher the disingenuous "real world" if the disabled bodies of these two characters are simultaneously called forth to figure the existing corruption of the university system itself? "Asylum," with its historically darker and more fraught implications, may indeed prove a better fit for the university, and perhaps we cannot too cleanly separate the "infirm" souls from the "crippled" bodies who find themselves at home there.

But I digress. I return to these early encounters for two reasons: to demonstrate the immediately charged nature of the relationship between Stoner and Lomax, and to provide some brief context for the academic rivalry that will later carry and superficially structure this *charge*.

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Let us return, for now, to the house party—this time, not to the kiss but to certain moments framing it.

> He spoke of the loneliness of his childhood in Ohio . . . as if of another person, of the early shame which had no source that he could understand and no defense that he could muster. And when he told of the long days and evenings he had spent alone in his room, reading to escape the limitations that his twisted body imposed upon him and finding gradually a sense of freedom . . . William Stoner felt a kinship that he had not suspected; he knew that Lomax had gone through a kind of conversion, an epiphany of knowing something through words that could not be put in words, as Stoner himself had once done

> . . . [I]n the way that was finally most important, the two men were alike, though neither of them might wish to admit it to the other or even to himself. (100)

And:

> Edith's clothes were flung in disarray on the floor beside the bed . . . she lay naked and glistening under the light on the white unwrinkled sheet . . . She was fast asleep, but in a trick of the light her slightly opened mouth seemed to shape the soundless words of passion and love. He stood looking at her for a long time. He felt a distant pity and reluctant friendship and familiar respect; and he felt also a weary sadness, for he knew that no longer could the sight of her bring upon him the agony of desire that he had once known. (102)

We see—just before they "hudd[le] together for warmth"—this growing closeness and identification between Lomax and Stoner ("William Stoner felt a kinship"; "the two men were alike"), and only shortly after the party has wrapped up we read that Stoner gazes at his sleeping wife and realizes "that no longer could the sight of her bring upon him the agony of desire" (102). Of course, an attraction to or desire for his male colleague would not necessarily preclude Stoner from *also* desiring Edith, but I find it nonetheless interesting how precisely these revelations (the intimacy with Lomax, the kiss, Stoner's realization that he no longer desires Edith) line up, how very closely they are juxtaposed. The few short pages over which this all occurs read as if these events are somehow naturally and logically connected, as if some invisible thread of explanation might weave from the party through the kiss and into this sad strange moment—a sort of failed or impotent male gaze—when Stoner studies the body of his naked wife and simply cannot dredge up the slightest desire for her. As if, however unconsciously, the

object of his desire has definitively shifted, though Stoner perhaps cannot quite grasp or "admit it . . . even to himself."

*

But if the party is the first scene of open warmth and affection between Lomax and Stoner, it is also the last:

> On Monday he saw Lomax and spoke to him with a warmth that trailed from the night of the party; Lomax answered him with an irony that was like cold anger, and he did not speak of the party that day or thereafter. It was as if he had discovered an enmity to hold him apart from Stoner, and he would not let it go. (102)

The implication here that Lomax is raising social and psychological defenses—reacting against his revealed vulnerability, his drunken "slip" at the party—is clear enough. But readers (not to mention Stoner) must surely wonder: *why* should Lomax double-down, as it were, on the defense? The simplest inference might be something along the lines of: his disability has often led to social rejection (cf. the "loneliness" of his childhood), and so Lomax has learned to remain cold and chronically guarded. But this explanation feels flimsy. First, it demands a rather reductive take on Lomax's disability and the various nuanced ways in which it may (or may not) inform his behavior and psychology; moreover, it accounts neither for the surprising intensity of Lomax's rebuff ("irony . . . like a cold anger"; "as if he had discovered an enmity") nor for the odd timing of it. After all, Stoner has at this point already spoken to him "with a warmth that trailed from the night of the party"; there can no longer be any question that Stoner has gladly accepted Lomax as a friend and intends to continue their camaraderie. Why now, with no apparent risk of rejection, would Lomax spurn Stoner's kindness and attempts at friendship?

There are many possible explanations here, but my favorite (and, I think, one of the strongest) is *desire*, and specifically taboo desire. After all, if Lomax wants Stoner—a colleague and a married *man*, a brutally unobtainable object—then keeping Stoner in the dark and at an arm's length might become an essential survival tactic. And desire—warped, smothered desire—would go a long way toward accounting for the strange affective intensity of Lomax's response. Moreover, while we might be tempted to ascribe the decades-long enmity between Lomax and Stoner entirely to the Charles Walker debacle, we in fact see it quite plainly here ("he had discovered an enmity"), seemingly without cause and years earlier in the story. *Desire* logically fills this queer gap in the narrative; after all, do we not hate the one we love when loving him proves impossible? I can only guess at Lomax's interiority, but given his intelligence and queer-coded characterization I think the likelihood that Lomax would be *aware* of his own sexual attraction to men generally and to Stoner specifically extremely high, much higher than the likelihood that Stoner—whose vague attraction to Lomax reads as hazy and mostly unconscious, conflated with nostalgic affection for a long-dead friend—would ever recognize the same of himself. And so while I would not go so far as to say that the desire Lomax harbors for Stoner is wholly unrequited, we can certainly see how it might be *felt* as unrequited—and cruelly, inalterably so—by Lomax himself.

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Stoner soon abandons his attempts at befriending Lomax, and so this—a bit chilly, vaguely (and inexplicably) inimical, though polite enough as colleagues, with (perhaps) the old strange undercurrent of "attraction" running latent between them—is how we find the two men on the precipice of what will become a career-defining (and nearly career-destroying) conflict for Stoner and a decades-long grudge for Lomax. I speak, of course, of Charles Walker's fateful

entry into Stoner's graduate seminar. Walker practically begs to be allowed into the seminar (134) despite seeming to hold no particular interest in the subject matter (" 'So if I'm to graduate in two years, I must have one [seminar] this semester' " [135]). He then arrives to his first class late and, once seated, makes a few presumptuous and embarrassingly ignorant comments.[15] After this rather cringe-inducing class, Stoner seeks out Lomax for counsel:

> Lomax waved genially. "Come on in. We're just breaking up."
>
> Stoner came in . . . When the student left, Stoner sat in the chair that he had vacated. Lomax looked at him inquiringly.
>
> "It's about a student," Stoner said. "Charles Walker. He said you sent him around to me." . . . "Can you tell me something about him?"
>
> Lomax looked up from his hands . . . "A good student. A superior student, I might say. He is doing his dissertation on Shelley and the Hellenistic Ideal. It promises to be brilliant, really brilliant. It will not be what some would call"—he hesitated over the word—"*sound*, but it is most imaginative. Did you have a particular reason for asking?"
>
> "Yes," Stoner said. "He behaved rather foolishly in the seminar today. I was just wondering if I should attach any special significance to it."
>
> Lomax's early geniality had disappeared, and the more familiar mask of irony had slipped over him. "Ah, yes," he said with a frosty smile. "The gaucherie and foolishness of the young. Walker is, for reasons you may understand, rather awkwardly shy and therefore at times defensive and rather too assertive. As do we all, he has his problems; but his scholarly and critical abilities are not, I hope, to be judged in the light of his rather

[15] " 'Wasn't it Samuel Johnson who said of Shakespeare himself that he had little Latin and less Greek?' / As the repressed laughter stirred in the room Stoner felt a kind of pity come over him. 'You mean Ben Jonson, of course.' / Walker took off his glasses and polished them, blinking helplessly. 'Of course,' he said. 'A slip of the tongue' " (139).

> understandable psychic disturbances." He looked directly at Stoner and said with cheerful malevolence, "As you may have noticed, he is a cripple."
>
> "It may be that," Stoner said . . . "I suppose it's really too soon for me to be concerned. I just wanted to check with you."
>
> Suddenly Lomax's voice was tight and near trembling with suppressed anger. "You will find him to be a superior student. I assure you, you will find him to be an *excellent* student." (139-140, emphasis his)

Inevitably, Stoner finds Walker to be a terrible student. He interrupts his classmates, treats the subject matter with general disdain, and largely neglects the required readings and coursework. After requesting and receiving multiple extensions, Walker noticeably improvises his final paper in front of the class, and his entire performance constitutes something of a freewheeling attack on *another* student's previously shared work.[16] Stoner then confronts Walker about this performance; he first offers to give Walker an incomplete in the class so that he may write another more satisfactory paper for a grade, and when Walker refuses this (" 'But sir,' Walker said. 'I have already done my paper. If I agree to do another one I will be admitting—I will admit—' " [150]) Stoner insists on at least seeing a draft of his original paper.[17] When Walker again refuses, supposedly on the principle that Stoner has not asked any of the other students to turn in their physical manuscripts, Stoner makes clear that he will receive an F in the class and, apparently angry, suggests that Walker may not be cut out for academia (151).

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[16] "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. / For it was clear even to the most inattentive students in the class that Walker was engaged in a performance that was entirely impromptu" (146).

[17] " 'All right,' Stoner said. 'Then if you will give me the manuscript . . . I shall see if something can be salvaged.' / 'Sir,' Walker cried, 'I would hesitate to let it out of my possession just now. The draft is *very* rough.' / With a grim and restless shame, Stoner continued, 'That's all right. I shall be able to find out what I want to know' " (151).

This confrontation sets the stage for the climactic moment of Walker's preliminary oral examinations. Stoner "gave Walker his F and thought no more about the matter" (153), although toward the beginning of spring semester he is briefly called to discuss a formal complaint from Walker with Gordon Finch, the department administrator and Stoner's old friend. Soon after this conversation he receives "a note from Finch informing him that he would be a member of the three-man committee who would examine" (156) Charles Walker, whose preliminary oral exams have been scheduled for mid-March. Stoner reminds Finch of the previous semester's conflict and attempts to be relieved of the duty, but for tedious bureaucratic reasons he is unsuccessful; his presence as one of Walker's examiners is required. The oral examination proves a rather miserable affair: Walker performs well—even brilliantly—when questioned by Lomax on narrow and specific topics related to his thesis, but fumbles whenever another examiner questions him; Lomax is frequently compelled to redirect the others' questions in order to help Walker save face.[18] And then it is Stoner's turn to question Walker:

> He was waiting to do what he knew he had to do, and he was waiting with a dread and an anger and a sorrow that grew more intense with every minute that passed . . .
>
> Stoner took a deep breath. Still looking at the ghost of his face in the mirrorlike finish of the tabletop, he said expressionlessly, "Mr. Walker, I'm going to ask you a few questions about English literature. They will be simple questions, and they will not require elaborate answers. I shall start early and I shall proceed chronologically, so far as time will allow me. . . " (161-162)

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[18] "It was, Stoner admitted, a masterful performance; unobtrusively, with great charm and good humor, Lomax managed it all. Sometimes, when Holland asked a question, Lomax pretended a good-natured puzzlement and asked for clarification. At other times, apologizing for his own enthusiasm, he followed up on Holland's questions with a speculation of his own, drawing Walker into the discussion, so that it seemed that he was an actual participant. He rephrased questions . . . changing them so that the original intent was lost in the elucidation" (161).

This, of course, does not bode well. Stoner does not allow for interruptions from Lomax and insists on dry, direct answers from Walker, who proves dismally unable to answer these simple questions regarding English literary history. Stoner therefore votes to fail him:

"Fail," Stoner said. "It's a clear failure."

"Oh, come now, Bill," Lomax cried. "You're being a bit hard on the boy, aren't you?"

. . . . . .

"Come off it, Holly," Stoner said tiredly. "The man's incompetent. There can be no question of that. The questions I asked him were those that should have been asked a fair undergraduate; and he was unable to answer a single one of them satisfactorily. And he's both lazy and dishonest. In my seminar last semester—"

"Your seminar!" Lomax laughed curtly. "Well, I've heard about that. And besides, that's another matter. The question is, how he did today. And it's clear . . . that he did quite well today until you started in on him."

"I asked him questions," Stoner said. "The simplest questions I could imagine. I was prepared to give him every chance . . . You are his thesis adviser, and it is natural that you two should have talked over his thesis subject. So when you questioned him on his thesis he did very well. But when we got beyond that—"

"What do you mean!" Lomax shouted. "Are you suggesting that I—that there was any—"

"I am suggesting nothing, except that in my opinion the candidate did not do an adequate job. I cannot consent to his passing."

. . . . . .

Lomax was very still. “That is your final word?” he asked icily.

“Yes,” Stoner said.

Lomax nodded. “Well, let me warn you, Professor Stoner, I do not intend to let the matter drop here. You have made—you have implied certain accusations here today —you have shown a prejudice that—that—” (167-168)

Shortly thereafter, Lomax attempts to bring formal charges of prejudice against Stoner (174-177); he ultimately fails, but when he is then (coincidentally) promoted he uses his new position to passive-aggressively assign Stoner the most tedious and inconvenient schedules—full of freshmen and sophomore surveys at strange, far-apart hours—and refuses to so much as acknowledge him in the halls. Stoner finally pays Lomax a visit in an attempt to put the conflict behind them, but to no avail:

“Look, Holly, it’s over and done with. Can’t we just drop it?”

Lomax looked at him steadily.

Stoner continued, “We’ve had a disagreement, but that isn’t unusual. We’ve been friends before, and I see no reason—”

“We have never been friends,” Lomax said distinctly.

"All right,” Stoner said. “But we’ve got along at least. We can keep whatever differences we have, but for God’s sake, there’s no need to display them. Even the students are beginning to notice.”

“And well the students might,” Lomax said bitterly, “since one of their own number nearly had his career ruined. A brilliant student, whose only crimes were his imagination, an enthusiasm and integrity that forced him into conflict with you—and yes, I might as well say it—an unfortunate physical affliction that would have called forth

> sympathy in a normal human being." With his good right hand Lomax held a pencil, and it trembled before him; almost with horror Stoner realized that Lomax was dreadfully and irrevocably sincere. "No," Lomax went on passionately, "for that I cannot forgive you" . . . "I'm going to be very frank with you, Stoner" . . . "I don't think you're fit to be a teacher; no man is, whose prejudices override his talents and his learning. I should probably fire you if I had the power; but I don't have the power, as we both know. We are—you are protected by the tenure system. I must accept that. But I don't have to play the hypocrite. I want to have nothing to do with you. Nothing at all. And I will not pretend otherwise."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> And for more than twenty years neither man was to speak again directly to the other. (181-182)

*

I have reiterated the Charles Walker debacle and its consequences so thoroughly here in order to both superficially contextualize the decades-long grudge that follows as well as to elucidate a few slightly odd moments salient to my argument that this apparent academic dispute operates covertly as a (sub)narrative of queer desire. We see that Lomax repeatedly accuses Stoner of "prejudice" against Walker, a word he first utters seemingly off-the-cuff after the oral exams ("you have shown a prejudice" [168]), then more deliberately—though still a bit vaguely—in Finch's office ("prejudiced feelings . . . prejudicial" [174]), and finally to Stoner with conviction ("whose prejudices" [181]), accusing him of what would now more commonly be referred to as ableism. Perhaps we are meant to gather that a disabled teacher is merely siding with his also-disabled student out of understanding and solidarity—that Lomax, having

undoubtedly faced ableism throughout his life, has perhaps become overly hasty to attribute it to others. Or, less generously, we might suppose that his accusations are a defensive gesture, an attempt to preemptively squash any possible insinuations of academic dishonesty on his and Walker's parts. Yet this latter explanation certainly doesn't square with Lomax's "dreadfully and irrevocably sincere" (181) speech, and neither explanation quite accounts for the strange emotional intensity of his reactions and the relentlessness of his grudge against Stoner.[19] And so here I would like simply to ask: *could* something else, something deeper and more visceral, be lurking in or behind these interactions? Something which itself cannot be put into words and so must play out silently *through* this surface dispute over Charles Walker's examination?

I have already posited that Lomax's disability may function at least partially to represent his queer desire, and also that Walker—himself so like (and desperate to be like) Lomax—may at times function as a proxy for Lomax himself. If we take these propositions together, then we can begin to grasp how Stoner's vote to fail Walker on the exam—what we might call an *academic* rejection of Walker—may *stand in for* and *be felt as* a romantic or sexual rejection of/by Lomax. The moment symbolically marks a choice on Stoner's part: a final, definitive refusal of the queer desire that has quietly haunted these men since, at least, the night of the housewarming party. It is perhaps no coincidence that Stoner's affair with Katherine Driscoll begins only *after* the Walker incident.[20] And if we perchance find Lomax's accusations of

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[19] I in no way intend to imply that ableism specifically and prejudice in general would or *should* not elicit intense emotions—merely that this specific conflict runs so deep, with Stoner's alleged prejudice so unapparent anywhere else in the text, that a bit of head-scratching from readers with regards to Lomax's claims and intensity here would not be unexpected.

[20] We also, of course, cannot fail to note that Lomax proves peculiarly invested in Stoner's affair with Katherine Driscoll, ultimately sabotaging it (218) and driving Katherine to leave the university. This degree of ongoing vengeful malevolence against Stoner (especially with regards to his love life) would imply, at least to my mind, a deep and deeply personal injury. (Or, barring that, sheer psychopathy, but I find the former explanation more compelling.)

prejudice a bit outlandish (and to be fair, many may not), we might feel differently if we take his use of the term "prejudice" to mean something a bit vaguer and more slippery than "ableism" as commonly understood. After all, what balm or recourse remains for Lomax but to deem Stoner prejudiced against a *body* like his when the other man seemingly cannot accept or reciprocate a desire—a *love*—like his? From this angle, these allegations of Stoner's prejudice against Walker become a polite screen for a rather more taboo conversation, and for the next twenty years Lomax sings the words of the disdainful colleague to the tune of the spurned, bitter lover.

5 CONCLUSION

In attempting to understand *Stoner* (and Stoner) as queer, I have perhaps, at least at times, read against the most apparent grain of the novel, or ruffled some textual feathers, as it were. I make no claims to have divined the private motivations of John Williams, nor—in the unlikely event of a clarifying séance—would I stake any large bets on those motivations tidily coinciding with my interpretations here. It is quite possible that I have done little more than subvert an entirely straightforward narrative, that I have merely crawled inside the "clean and proper body" (Kristeva 72) of the text and twisted it to my own perverse ends; still, I should count myself quite lucky if I have indeed achieved that. In the infamous words of Roland Barthes,

> We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single 'theological' meaning . . . but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations . . . a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed. (*Rustle* 53)

So perhaps I should say instead that I hope, at the very least, to have rustled the fabric of *Stoner*, to have briefly stretched it taut against some twilight-flooded windowpane and wondered at its strange and subtle textures.

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