10.22439/asca.v57i1.7494

Kyoung-Min Han
Hallym University, Korea, 0009-0006-8693-258X

Yonghwa Lee
Incheon National University, Korea, 0009-0004-1086-1354

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF LOVE IN JOHN WILLIAMS'S *STONER*

Abstract: This article examines the transformative power of love demonstrated by Stoner's life in John Williams's *Stoner*. Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of love, the essay contends that Stoner's life, driven by love, is far from a failure. Stoner's falling in love with literature can be seen as what Marion calls a "saturated phenomenon" in that it makes him transcend himself and have his being defined in relation to the alterity of the other. Stoner's relationship with Katherine Driscoll is significant because it helps to resolve the separation of the mind and the senses caused by his love for literature. Through his relationship with Katherine, in which lust and learning become one process, Stoner recognizes love as an ongoing, continual process that involves the dynamic power of time. Realizing that he has given love to every moment of his life, he gives love even to his moment of death, which ironically becomes the most important moment of his celebration of life. Through his book, he seeks to continue to love loving beyond the moment of death and thereby defy death and non-being.

Keywords: love, literature, saturated phenomenon, the lover's advance, life

When John Williams's novel *Stoner* was published in 1965, it received lukewarm reception. The author himself was shunted into the shadows, along with his works. Although his historical novel *Augustus* (1972) won the National Book Award in 1973, even then he had to share the prize with John Barth's *Chimera*. *Stoner* charts the life of the eponymous William Stoner, a farm boy-turned English professor. Since most of the events of Stoner's life take place in a state university in Columbia, Missouri, *Stoner* has been categorized under the genre of the campus novel. It failed to gain popularity, however, even as a campus novel at the time of publication,[1] and it is difficult even now to find many scholarly discussions of the novel as a campus novel.[2] After almost forty years of obscurity, the novel was "reissued to dithyrambic praise in 2003" (Mewshaw 17) and has garnered both critical acclaim and sales since then. On its fiftieth anniversary, Gabe Habash discussed the surprising revival of the novel in both the US and abroad, and held that its "chronicle of the life of an ordinary man is perhaps the key to why it's translating so well" (n. pag.). Stoner is indeed as ordinary as he can be in the sense that, like so many people in real life, he lives a life lacking any noticeable achievements. The sort of eulogy offered at the beginning of the novel makes it clear that he has not made a great impact in his profession: "He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses" (1).

It is true that *Stoner* deals with universal themes of human life such as "[l]ove, commitment, compassion, work, backbone, truthfulness, death" (Reimann qtd. in Habash, n. pag.), and this explains the novel's appeal to many different groups of readers; however, it does not seem sufficient to account for a sudden surge in popularity in the twenty-first century. One possible explanation for the lack of interest in the novel in the twentieth century might be found in its apparently existentialist bent: despite his undistinguished career and unhappy marriage, Stoner takes full responsibility for his choices and seeks to find meaning in them. The publication year of the novel happened to coincide with the decline of existentialism, which is commonly understood to be during the 1960s. The younger generation of French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze disregarded Sartre, and the rise of post-structuralism shifted attention in literary interpretive practices toward questioning such concepts as universal truth or knowledge.

More recently, however, there has been a stream of criticism that focuses on the existentialist aspect of the novel. Mel Livatino, for example, claims that despite the lack of outward accomplishments, Stoner is "a quiet Job-like hero of the soul" who is "destroyed" but not "defeated" (421). Comparing Stoner with Sisyphus, Michael Sperber argues that "although he fails to thrive, he is not a failure" (2); like Sisyphus, who punishes himself with futile labor, Stoner manages to survive to atone for his guilt for turning away from his parents and their expectations for him. Umi Nur Fadillah also reads Stoner's stoic attitude toward life in relation to Camus's existentialist idea as manifested in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Fadillah holds that a Camusian existential wisdom is most noticeable in Stoner's pursuit of passion in life despite the unobtainability of meaning. In a similar vein, M. Clark argues that Stoner's quiet and nonconfrontational acceptance of "sadness and loss as part and parcel of all life stories, including those of a nation" (21) evinces a new kind of heroism. Although these readings offer insights into how to find meaning in Stoner's undistinguished career and unhappy marriage, they all seem to accept the premise that Stoner's life needs to be redeemed and that his capacity to love does not lead to an important achievement on its own terms. Moreover, it is not clear how and why an existentialist

text can come into fashion again in the twenty-first century when existentialism itself is no longer fashionable.

Departing from a position that interprets *Stoner* mainly as an existentialist work, this essay investigates how Stoner's love of literature exerts a transformative power throughout his life and becomes his salvation. Regarding the author's literary background, Mewshaw states that, just like Stoner, Williams himself "discovered in education and especially in literature a kind of salvation, an almost religious reverence for the word" (19). Mewshaw's essay contends that the author's "almost religious reverence for the word" reflected in Stoner's life is precisely what fascinates readers of the twenty-first century. Pointing out that "over the last decade, literary theory has opened itself up to the 'post-secular turn'" (8), Cassandra Falke argues that there are signs that literary theorists are moving beyond the linguistic confines of (post-)structuralism and renewing their attention to the transformative power, as well as the performative aspect, of a text. Among theorists who offer a philosophical grounding for the discourse of ethics in literary criticism, Falke focuses on Jean-Luc Marion, a French philosopher and Roman Catholic theologian. Although he was taught by such poststructuralist thinkers as Derrida, Louis Althusser, and Deleuze, Marion takes a different position as he investigates the intersection of philosophy and religion, suggesting that love takes precedence over cognition or even being itself in the formation of who we are. Falke builds upon Marion's phenomenological work, positing that reading can fortify our capacity to love by providing us with practice in love's virtues, such as "attention, empathy, and a willingness to be overwhelmed" (2).

The theological slant within Marion's phenomenology insinuates that the novel's rejuvenation in the twenty-first century is far from the outcome of a reactionary trend in readers. In the first place, *Stoner* is not exactly as "existentialist" as posited by some critics. The novel is rather more in line with the Platonism of Simone Weil or the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch, both of which are invested in critiquing the egoistic tendency in some forms of existentialism. The notion of "attention," which Murdoch borrows from Weil, is of particular importance in understanding why Murdoch criticizes the Sartrean conception of freedom. For Murdoch, Sartre's concept of freedom isolates the will or the choosing self, making it difficult to understand the consciousness within the categories of concern, care, and responsibility, which are all related to the idea of attention. As Richard Moran points out, attention for Murdoch "is in its very nature answerable to something outside oneself" (174), and this interest in achieving a "clear vision" of someone or something outside oneself as "a result of moral imagination and moral effort" (Murdoch 37) reveals the extent to which the active interaction between subject and object is valued in Murdoch's moral philosophy. Marion's phenomenology of love allows for a theological restoration in the postmodern era by suggesting that "the Divine cannot be subjugated to metaphysics, naturalism, or categories" (McGravey 129), and his investment in examining one's personal interaction with the Divine, especially in terms of love, aligns with Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of coming to a new appreciation of something or someone by attending to them (or it). This similarity between Marion's postmodern theology and Murdoch's idea of attention, which undertakes a critique of existentialism, suggests that *Stoner*'s new reception can be understood as the underlying connection with a phenomenological aspect in the novel, rather than an impulse to retrieve the existentialism of the twentieth century.

Drawing on Marion's phenomenology of love, this essay seeks to arrive at a more just assessment of Stoner's achievements in life.[3] The shift of attention from what a text *says* to what a text

does in Falke's phenomenology is also useful for understanding how Stoner's love of literature radically transforms his mode of existence. Stoner's entire life is driven by his earnest desire to truthfully live out his own "reverence for the word."[4] Initially, Stoner falls in love with literature through his encounter with William Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, which launches the process of "a constant change within himself" (26). Falke's theory of reading as a means of strengthening our ability to love is founded upon the premise that "literature operates with an ethical force upon the selves that we are continually becoming" (5), and the "constant change" that occurs within Stoner testifies to the validity of such a premise. In analyzing Stoner's ongoing transformation, instigated by his encounter with Shakespeare, this essay pays particular attention to the changes in Stoner's relationship with time, of which there has been very little discussion among critics of the novel.[5] Time is of critical importance in the examination of the "constant change" in Stoner because one cannot talk about a transformative process without considering the passage of time. Stoner's capacity to love grows as his relationship with time changes. There are two pivotal events in his life that radically alter his relationship with time: the first one is his falling in love with literature in Sloane's classroom; the second one is his falling in love with Katherine Driscoll, with whom he shares his love of literature. Stoner's falling in love with literature changes his relationship with time by making him *have* time rather than be *in* time. In connecting to Shakespeare, a poet who has been dead for more than three centuries, Stoner is born into time and begins to "*have* past and future" (Brann xiv).[6] By resolving the separation of the mind and the senses caused by his love for literature, Stoner's love for Katherine helps him recognize the dynamic power of time in constantly shaping and changing his being. Reading Katherine's book, dedicated to him after years of separation, Stoner realizes not only that he has never stopped loving Katherine, but also that he has given love to every moment of his life. Stoner's act of giving love even to his moment of death fills the only book he wrote with his own life, making it carry on the interaction with the past, the present, and the future.

"Mr Shakespeare Speaks to [Stoner] across Three Hundred Years": Stoner's Birth into Time

Before examining how Stoner's encounter with literature initiates "a constant change within himself," it is necessary to understand why falling in love is such an essential event in one's transformation. For Marion, love is the most distinguishing feature of human beings. Defining a human being as "the loving animal," Marion states, "[m]an is defined neither by the *logos*, nor by the being within him, but by this fact that he loves (or hates), whether he wants to or not" (7). In explicating the idea of love, Marion posits the notion of a "saturated phenomenon." A saturated phenomenon is, roughly speaking, an overwhelming and astounding phenomenon in which much more is given to us than we can take in. In Marion's terms, it is a phenomenon "in which the flux of intuitions always, and by far, exceeds the safety of the forms that I could ever assign to them, as does the intelligibility of the intentionalities that I could ever read there" (14). In other words, in a saturated phenomenon, intuition exceeds intentionality.[7] Marion postulates love as a representative saturated phenomenon in stating that "the one that I love clearly imposes herself upon me as a saturated phenomenon, whose endless and measureless intuition does not cease to overflow all of the significations that I attempt to assign to her" (210). A saturated phenomenon helps us become aware of our perceptual limitations by forcing us to be exposed to what we did not know before. Being reminded of our limitations by saturated

phenomena can be a good thing in Marion's phenomenology of love because "by shattering the conceptual framework that we try to apply to them, saturated phenomena startle and permanently change us" (Falke 28). By breaking our cognitive framework and forcing us to open ourselves to what is radically other, love as a saturated phenomenon expands our world and even gives rise to a new world.

Stoner has never had his conceptual framework challenged by any external force until he is asked to think about the meaning of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 by Professor Archer Sloane in his Survey of English literature class. Born to a family of poor dirt farmers whose "lives [are] expended in cheerless labor, their wills broken, their intelligence numbed" (110), Stoner has mindlessly been going through the motions every day until this moment.[8] To Stoner, therefore, Shakespeare is merely "'a poet who is dead'" (10), and neither Shakespeare nor his poetry means anything to him. To bewildered Stoner, Sloane recites the sonnet, making "the words and sounds and rhythms . . . for a moment become himself" (10), and Stoner experiences an electrifying moment of hearing Shakespeare "speak[ ] to him across three hundred years" (11). What Shakespeare says to Stoner, however, is not something Stoner can comprehend within his perceptual and cognitive framework. This is why he keeps saying, "[i]t means," without completing the rest of the sentence (12). This incomplete sentence does not necessarily signify that what is spoken to him is incomplete or not transformative enough. Shakespeare's sonnet sounds so astounding and dazzling to him that all he understands at the moment is that he is taking in something that exceeds his intentional structures. Stoner's contact with Shakespeare is thus what Marion would call "a saturated phenomenon" in that it awes and overwhelms him, bringing about a fundamental change in him. Emphasizing the significance of Stoner being forced for the first time to contemplate the meaning of something, Livatino appositely describes what happens to Stoner on that day as "break[ing] into consciousness" (417). Tony McKenna calls Stoner's transformation "an elemental change in being," which makes it impossible for Stoner "to return to the life he has known on the farm with his parents, because it is an existence which has ceased to belong to himself" (191).

The following description of Stoner's reactions to Sonnet 73 illuminates the nature of the change caused by this particular saturated phenomenon:

> William Stoner realized that for several moments he had been holding his breath. He expelled it gently, minutely aware of his clothing moving upon his body as his breath went out of his lungs. He looked away from Sloane about the room. Light slanted from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a dimness; a student blinked, and a thin shadow fell upon a cheek whose down had caught the sunlight. Stoner became aware that his fingers were unclenching their hard grip on his desk-top. He turned his hands about under his gaze, marveling at their brownness, at the intricate way the nails fit into his blunt finger-ends; he thought he could feel the blood flowing invisibly through the tiny veins and arteries, throbbing delicately and precariously from his fingertips through his body. (11-12)

Deeply impressed by Sloane's recitation of Shakespeare's sonnet, in which the reader becomes mentally and emotionally united with what he reads, Stoner forgets to breathe "for several moments." The suspension of his bodily motions represented by the act of "holding his

breath" intimates that a literary experience for Stoner is a transcendent one in which he escapes the confines of his individual self and becomes connected to a larger life or existence. The reach of his mind extends not merely to three centuries ago, when Shakespeare wrote the sonnet, but also to an eternity that transcends time, and it is no wonder that what he experiences at this moment is described later as feeling "out of time" (15). The shift in Stoner's attention from Sloane to the light from the windows settling "upon the faces of his fellow students" also indicates the expansion of his consciousness by showing how he can now afford to look around and notice the existence of other beings. His perception that "the illumination seem[s] to come from within them and go out against a dimness" reveals another transcendent aspect of his literary experience through its translation of an external phenomenon of the light from the windows into an internal process of his mind. That is, although Stoner's senses tell him that the light he sees comes from outside the windows, his mind tapping into eternity makes it seem as if the illumination comes from within human beings. It is noteworthy that Stoner's transcendent experience, triggered by his encounter with Shakespeare, leads to the separation of his mind and his senses. The functioning of Stoner's mind is so heightened that his mind nearly becomes separated from the workings of his physical senses, and he perceives his hands, fingers, and blood flowing in his body from a distanced perspective as if they belong to someone else. All these reactions intimate that in surrendering himself to forces outside his "own egological sphere" (Marion 102), Stoner experiences a fundamental change in what defines and constitutes his self. He is, so to speak, "born again," into a new being.

One way of explaining how Stoner is "born again" is by looking at the change in his relationship with time. People like Stoner's parents, who are without past, present, and future, do not distinguish one day from another, and therefore the details of everyday life do not carry any particular meaning to be noticed. However, Stoner's experience of having "a dead poet" come alive for him makes him realize how, in the mind of a self-conscious being with "a self-acknowledged interiority," past, present, and future are all interconnected, and now Stoner is capable of taking notice of and granting meaning to the present moment. "[L]ight slant[ing] from the windows" is a humdrum and commonplace detail of life that often eludes our attention, yet it is of particular importance because it reveals how firmly he is in possession of his present. What is paradoxical about mundane realities of everyday life is that even though they are largely considered insignificant, and thus fail to attract our attention, they constitute the most precious and integral part of our beings: they can be experienced neither in the past nor in the future, but only in the present, the only phase of time when we actually have the power to determine the shape of our lives. In being true to his existence at the present moment, Stoner is able to pay attention to the slanting light from the windows and make it memorable and meaningful. His present experience, then, can turn into a past memory for his future.

Although Stoner's contact with Shakespeare helps him have past, present, and future and see their interconnectedness, it does not sufficiently enable him to grasp the dynamic relationship between time and his being. Stoner's contemplation of the future just before the beginning of his graduate studies offers an effective example of his limited understanding of how time shapes being:

> But before William Stoner the future lay bright and certain and unchanging. He saw it, not as a flux of event and change and potentiality, but as a territory ahead that awaited his exploration. He saw it as the

> great University library, to which new wings might be built, to which new books might be added and from which old ones might be withdrawn, while its true nature remained essentially unchanged. He saw the future in the institution to which he had committed himself and which he so imperfectly understood; he conceived himself changing in that future, but he saw the future itself as the instrument of change rather than its object. (24)

The passage begins with the word "But" because of the historical context, which is supposed to make Stoner feel uncertain about the future. With the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, most students at Stoner's university wonder about the possibility of America's involvement in the war in Europe, as they are "pleasantly unsure of their own futures" (24). Unlike the students around him, Stoner is sure of the future before him. Exhilarated by Sloane's advice to continue his studies in English literature and become a teacher, he feels that "the future lay bright and certain and unchanging." Stoner makes the mistake of confusing time with space, not any kind of space, but "the great University library." As an immobile entity designed to endure the inevitable changes brought about by the passage of time, the University library actually represents the opposite of time: something fixed, static, and unchanging. Stoner's view of the future "not as a flux of event and change and potentiality, but as a territory ahead that awaited his exploration" does not merely reveal his lack of understanding of the dynamic nature of time. It also shows his mistaken idea that his being is somehow fixed, and that "as the instrument of change rather than its object," the future plays a very limited role in shaping his being, which he thinks has already been completed. At this point in life, he does not realize that the future is so full of uncertainty and potentiality that the way in which he exerts his free will at each and every moment determines and shapes his being, which is also constantly in flux. As we stated above, Falke's theory that reading can help strengthen our capacity to love is grounded on the idea that "literature operates with an ethical force upon the selves that we are continually becoming" (5). Stoner is unable to understand, however, that he is "continually becoming" his own self. As a consequence, in spite of his passion for literature, and after a series of attempts to love without the hope of having them reciprocated, he reaches a point at the age of forty-two where "he c[an] see nothing before him that he wishe[s] to enjoy and little behind that he care[s] to remember" (186).

"Lust and Learning": Stoner's Interaction with Time

It is not until he has an opportunity to share his love for literature with another human being that Stoner's relationship with time reaches another pivotal turning point and helps him gain another important realization about love. Though Stoner's relationship with Katherine Driscoll has received some scholarly attention, it has not yet been thoroughly investigated in terms of how profoundly it transforms his perception of time, as well as his ethical being.[9] Stoner's changing understanding of love in the following passage demonstrates how his love for Katherine opens his eyes to the dynamic power of time to affect his being:

> In his extreme youth Stoner had thought of love as an absolute state of being to which, if one were lucky, one might find access; in his maturity he had decided it was the heaven of a false religion, toward which one ought to gaze with an amused disbelief, a gently familiar contempt, and an embarrassed nostalgia. Now in his middle age he began to know that it was neither a state of grace nor an illusion; he saw it as a human act of becoming, a condition that

> was invented and modified moment by moment and day by day, by the will and the intelligence and the heart. (201)

Just as he thought of his future as a fixed entity, specifically in the form of the University library, Stoner thought of "love as an absolute state of being" when he was very young. This idea of love as a "state of being" to which one must try to "find access" is akin to his conception of the future as some kind of space. Stoner's understanding of love "in his maturity" is that it is an illusion worthy of "an amused disbelief, a gently familiar contempt, and an embarrassed nostalgia." Among his reactions to the "illusion" of love, "an embarrassed nostalgia" is particularly notable in that it involves his attitude toward time, in this case toward the past. Understood as a sentimental longing for the past, the word "nostalgia" implies that before he falls in love with Katherine, Stoner regarded not only the future but also the past as something static, fixed, and out of reach of his free will. He might have believed in the reality of love in the past, albeit "as an absolute state of being," but in his older years, he just feels nostalgic for his past belief in love, and that embarrassingly. He merely thinks that his decisions and actions in the present moment are completely irrelevant and therefore cannot affect what he believed or thought in the past. Being in love with someone who shares his passion for literature, however, makes him realize that love is "a human act of becoming," and that how he exercises his "will" and "intelligence" and "heart" revises and alters it "moment by moment and day by day." As Joakim Wrethed points out, what Stoner experiences when he falls in love with Shakespeare's sonnet is having his "perceptions tingle with life" (155), and the process of "becom[ing] the life he has glimpsed" (156) begins already at that point;[10] however, it takes his falling in love with a woman to realize this. His new perspective on love as a process of becoming also expands and deepens his understanding of the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. As is indicated by the statement that "he started to think of themselves as never really having existed before they came together" (203), Stoner begins to see how his experience in the present moment affects and even transforms his perception of his existence in the past. His newly gained insight into love ultimately helps him comprehend how his present constantly rearranges and reshapes his past, and future, rendering his being never fixed, but dynamic and constantly in flux.

M. C. Dillon's examination of the phenomenology of love provides a useful foundation for comprehending how Stoner's love relationship with Katherine helps him gain an insight into the ever-changing nature of his self-identity. Employing the existentialist perspective on love as a response to human finitude, Dillon suggests that love can offer ontological affirmation by leading one to strive, together with another fellow human being, "toward an intersubjectively valid existence" (356-57). According to Dillon, "love is doubly conditioned: it is conditioned on the validity of my perception of the other, and it is conditioned on [my lover's] affirmation of me as a valid person" (358). These double conditions are significant because they both "demand growth and self-transcendence" (Dillon 358). That is, in order not to fall back into autoerotic narcissism, one must step outside of what Marion calls one's "own egological sphere" and engage in a genuine interaction with a "truly transcendent other, one whose viewpoint is autonomous and external" (Dillon 358). Stoner's encounter with Shakespeare's sonnet is a transcendent experience since it takes him out of his "egological sphere" and brings him into contact with another consciousness. There are obvious limitations, however, to the kind of ontological affirmation Stoner can get from this contact: as a dead person, Shakespeare can neither receive nor return his love. Katherine, on the other hand, can reciprocate his love for her and share his love for literature, the most important aspect

of his identity. In providing Stoner with the ontological affirmation that he needs, Katherine's love helps him see his identity as something perpetually in the process of change. What Katherine loves about Stoner is much more than a series of fixed properties. If Katherine loves Stoner "for who [he] is (which includes the projects that anticipate [his] future), then [her] love is conditioned upon [his] fulfillment of that identity" (Dillon 357), which he may or may not fulfill depending on how he lives his present moment. For Stoner and Katherine, who they are includes the projects not only of each other's futures, but also of each other's pasts, which is why Stoner "started to think of themselves as never really having existed before they came together."

What makes the kind of ontological affirmation Stoner receives from Katherine unique is that their relationship is simultaneously intellectual and erotic. Unlike Shakespeare's voice in his sonnet, Katherine has flesh and body, and, as such, she gives Stoner an opportunity to be exposed to "the radical alterity of the other" that is absolutely unsubstitutable and non-replaceable (Marion 98). More importantly, their relationship as lovers makes essential their use of their physical senses as each steps out of their egological spheres and has their being defined by the other. In being in a reciprocal and erotic relationship with a woman who is also his intellectual companion, Stoner finds out that the workings of the mind and those of the senses do not necessarily have to rule each other out. As we discussed earlier, the transcendent experience Stoner has through his learning of Shakespeare's sonnet has resulted in the separation of his mind and his senses. Stoner's "break[ing] into consciousness" leads him to perceive the working of his bodily senses as something belonging to another being. On the other hand, Stoner's relationship with Katherine stimulates the use of his senses while simultaneously enriching and elevating his mind. Regarding what is unique about their love, Katherine says to Stoner, "'[l]ust and learning. . . . That's really all there is, isn't it?'" (204). Being "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" (205), they had not really considered the possibility of the mind and the senses working together, but instead believed "that one had to be chosen at some expense of the other" (205). In loving each other for who they are, Stoner and Katherine affirm sexuality in each other, as well as the love and passion they have for literature. Being in a relationship in which "love and learning [are] one process" (205), they discover that the mind actually "could intensify" (205) the senses.

This discovery of the complementary relationship between the mind and the senses sheds light on how Stoner can continue to love Katherine with almost the same intensity even when they are physically apart. In principle, the only phase of time available for sensory experience is the present. Through the experience of having "[l]ust and learning" complement each other, however, Stoner finds out how to utilize the power of his mind to make his past and future the objects of sensual experience as well. The reaction Stoner has to Katherine's book years after their separation provides a case in point:

> It was as good as he had thought it would be. The prose was graceful, and its passion was masked by a coolness and clarity of intelligence. It was herself he saw in what he read, he realized; and he marveled at how truly he could see her even now. Suddenly it was as if she were in the next room, and he had only moments before left her; his hands tingled, as if they had touched her. And the sense of his loss, that he had for so long dammed within him, flooded out, engulfed him, and he let himself be carried outward, beyond the control of his will; he did not wish to save himself. (259)

In reading Katherine's book, which is dedicated to him, Stoner sees much more than the words on the pages. He sees Katherine "herself in what he reads," and he "marvel[s] at how truly he [can] see her even now" after many years. It is not just his mind, but also his senses that become more evident in the next sentence, in which he feels "as if she were in the next room." Even though Katherine belongs now to his past, he can still experience sensations of being with her "as if he had only moments before left her." The tingling sensation in his hands is especially remarkable as it contrasts with the distanced perception he has of his hands and fingers in Sloane's classroom. When he falls in love with literature for the first time, the enhanced function of his mind leads to the separation of his mind and senses, even to the point of making him feel alienated from his own body. The experience of falling in love with a person who shares his love for literature, however, resolves his alienation from his body and enables him, through the power of his mind, to experience sensations of touching a loved one who has long been physically absent from him in life. In letting "the sense of his loss, that he ha[s] for so long dammed within him, flood[ ] out, engulf[ ] him," Stoner acknowledges that his love for Katherine is by no means some event in the past, but is still an ongoing reality of his life that will continue into the future. Stoner thus gains another insight into the interconnectedness of past, present, and future: his love for Katherine makes all three phases of time available for sensory experience. Stoner's act of letting "himself be carried outward, beyond the control of his will" demonstrates his renouncement of his reductionist attitude toward time and being. Instead of trying to "save himself" by holding on to the image of himself as a fixed entity, he accepts his existence as it constantly interacts with time as "a flux of event and change and potentiality" (24).

Stoner's final realization about love needs to be understood in this context. In perceiving through his sensory reactions to Kathrine's book his ongoing love for her, Stoner understands how his erotic relationship with her has trained him to use his senses to love her even in the absence of her physical body. The vivid and intense sensations of love brought by Katherine's book surprise Stoner with the knowledge that despite his being "nearly sixty years old," he is far from being "beyond the force of such passion, of such love" (259). This knowledge in turn helps him recognize that he has never been beyond the power of love at any moment in his life and will never be:

> He had, in odd ways, given [love] 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. (259)

The definition of love "as a passion neither of the mind nor of the flesh," but rather as "a force that comprehend[s] them both" significantly illustrates how his capacity to love has grown since the time Katherine was physically present in his life. If his relationship with Katherine has taught him how the mind and the senses can complement and intensify each other, his realization of the continuing presence of the power of love across the past, the present, and the future enlightens him as to the truth about love. Love has its origin neither in the mind nor in the flesh (or the senses), and thus it is not restricted or contained by either. This means that love is neither fixed nor stabilized according to the passage of time. Instead, as "a force that comprehend[s] both" the mind and the flesh, love constitutes the most important part of our being, thus conditioning our active interaction with time in a way that makes us feel alive in every moment. For Stoner, the meaning of being alive is nothing

other than fully opening his being to an object of love and letting it continually change and deepen him. Stoner's life full of love is thus a testament to the truth that, for a person truly in love, the past, the present, and the future are no longer three different phases of time intrinsically separated from one another. Rather, they are all bound by love that has the power to turn the mind and the flesh into "the matter of love, its specific substance." Beginning with his encounter with Shakespeare's sonnet, then, Stoner's life has been an ongoing process of his transformation into "the matter of love, its specific substance." Considering that Katherine is the first one to return his love, it is amazing that Stoner has never ceased to give love even when there was no hope of having it reciprocated, and that he has done it "most fully when he was unaware of his giving." This kind of unconditional dedication to love can be explained through the concept of "the lover's advance" (125), which Marion considers the second step in the erotic phenomenon.

Signifying the willingness to love first, "the lover's advance" can be made when the lover moves on from the question, "'Does anyone out there love me?'" to the question, "'Can I be the first to love?'" (Marion 125). According to Marion, "the lover's advance" is crucial to the constitution of one's self: "I do not become myself when I simply think, doubt, or imagine, because others can think my thoughts, which in any case most often do not concern me but, instead, the object of my intentionalities; . . . But I become myself definitively each time and for as long as I, as lover, can love first" (76). Even without any promise of reciprocity, in asking "Can I love first?" Stoner puts himself "in the presence of a specific alterity capable of loving" him (Falke 49). This is how he manages to effect his transformation into "the matter of love" regardless of the (lack of) response by his objects of love. Importantly, the primary purpose of "the lover's advance" Stoner makes is none other than announcing to his objects of love that he is alive. For Stoner, loving to love is the most fundamental and effective way of defying non-being and asserting his existence. Katherine's book helps him realize how he has unconsciously been making "the lover's advance" in every moment of his life and leads him to consciously continue doing it.

Ironically, what completes his transformation into "the matter of love" that celebrates life is his moment of death, when he most consciously makes "the lover's advance." In his dying moment, Stoner reaches out for his book, which he is aware is "forgotten and . . . serve[s] no use" (288) from the perspective of the world. Though he is without "the illusion that he would find himself there, in that fading print," he simultaneously realizes and thinks to himself, "a small part of him that he could not deny *was* there, and would be there" (288, italics original). What he does to the book after this realization illustrates that Stoner is in fact most alive and loving at the moment of his death:

> 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 his window, shone upon the page, and he could not see what was written there. (288)

The fact that the act of opening the book makes it become "not his own" intimates that Stoner is, at this moment, giving all his being to the book, just as he has given love "to every moment of his life." He is emptying his being and filling the book with it, and the book takes on a life of its own.[11] Stoner's feeling "a tingling, as if those pages

were alive" evokes the two pivotal moments that permanently changed his relationship with time: when he fell in love with literature and when he fell in love with a woman who loved literature. Specifically, as he was listening to Sloane recite Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, Stoner became acutely aware of the sensations of the blood flowing "from his fingertips through his body." Now that he is on his deathbed, instead of listening to and connecting to a dead poet's poem, Stoner is speaking to his own book and almost transferring to it the tingling that comes "through his fingers and course[s] through his flesh and bone." The moment of his falling in love with Katherine also takes place through a book—more precisely, a book manuscript she revised after she audited his class—and his fingers similarly responded to the pages: "My God, he said to himself in a kind of wonder; and his fingers trembled with excitement as he turned the pages" (190). As we stated earlier, Stoner's reaction to Katherine's book after years of separation was the tingling of his hands, "as if they had touched her." The difference between that moment of love and this moment of dying is that now, as his physical life is ebbing away, "the old excitement that [is] like terror fixe[s] him where he" lies, rather than rendering his existence dynamic and continually in flux. The pages become alive in his stead, and "[t]he sunlight, passing his window, sh[ines] upon the page." It is almost as if this time Stoner's book, instead of its dead writer, would notice the sunshine and tap into eternity, just as Stoner noticed the light from the windows on his fellow students' faces back in Sloane's classroom. His fingers finally loosen and the book is separated from his body, free to continue Stoner's interaction with his past, present, and future by carrying "a small part of him" that is and will be there because his life has become the matter of love. Much like his beloved poet, Shakespeare, Stoner pours his life into his writing and seeks to make it alive "[s]o long as men can breathe or eyes can see" (Sonnet 18, line 13).[12] Stoner's book thus symbolizes the capacity of love to defy death and non-being as Stoner continues to have time and make "the lover's advance" even after the cessation of his physical life.

"The Lover's Advance": Stoner's Celebration of Life

"'It's love, Mr Stoner,'" says Sloane to Stoner, explaining why he believes Stoner is going to be a teacher of literature. "'You are in love. It's as simple as that'" (19). Sloane's comment on Stoner's state demonstrates the fundamentally transformative nature of the experience of falling in love. Whatever the object of love is, once one is in love, there is no going back to one's past self. Having had his conceptual framework shattered by hearing Shakespeare speak to him, Stoner cannot go back to his life as a dirt farmer, but instead is "'going to be a teacher'" of literature (19). After such an overwhelming and transcendent experience, in which he is exposed to the "radical alterity of the other," no matter what response he receives from literature—he is never acknowledged as a great scholar or teacher—he cannot help, in Marion's words, loving literature. Dedicated to making "the lover's advance," Stoner's life reveals that the kind of transformation love brings about is always ongoing and continuous, involving a radical change in one's relationship with time. Before falling in love with Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, Stoner merely exists with no capacity for self-conscious reflection on how his being is defined and shaped in the flow of time. Being in love with literature supplies him with access to a whole new world by enabling him to communicate with literary characters or people from the past and letting them influence and change his being in the present.

Although Stoner's love for literature helps him have a past, present, and future, it is not until he

shares his love for literature with Katherine Driscoll that he revises his rather mechanical perception of the future as some fixed entity he is supposed to explore. While Stoner's love for literature has caused the separation of the mind and the senses, his relationship with Katherine resolves the separation and makes him see the potential of the mind and the senses to intensify each other when "love and learning" become one process. In turn, this understanding helps him comprehend that love is not "an absolute state of being" but "a human act of becoming," which entails the exertion of his will and intelligence and heart "moment by moment and day by day" (201). The powerful and intense sensations of love Stoner experiences in reaction to Katherine's book after many years of separation from her help him realize that his love for her is an ongoing reality, and this realization in turn helps him recognize how he has always given love to every moment of his life. Even in the absence of any hope of having his love returned, Stoner has never ceased to love loving. That is, he has passionately been making what Marion calls "the lover's advance" since his initial encounter with Shakespeare, and this has been his way of announcing that he is alive. Realizing how he has unconsciously been giving love to every moment of his life, Stoner consciously gives love even to his moment of death, which ironically becomes the most crucial moment in his celebration of his life. Instead of recognizing death as the cessation of his existence, Stoner picks up the only book he has authored in his life and fills it with his life and being, hoping and believing that it will continue the interaction he has had with his past, present, and future through his capacity to love. Stoner's book, then, is the greatest proof that his life is not a failure. Containing "a small part of him that he could not deny was there, and would be there," Stoner's book testifies to the continuing presence of the power of love across the past, present, and future that has constituted his life. In fact, his love for loving is so great that he himself transforms into "the matter of love," which continues to exist beyond his death. Although the novel ends with Stoner's death, his book, which "f[alls] into the silence of the room," turns out to be the loudest declaration ever: "Look! I am alive."

Notes

This work was supported by an Incheon National University Research Grant in 2021.

1. The "campus novel" or the "academic novel" itself was not out of popularity at the time of *Stoner*'s publication. Many well-known campus novels, such as Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), and David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), enjoyed great popularity at the time and still remain in print. According to Merrit Moseley, some find the main attraction of academic fiction in its power to satirize higher education, while others focus on its "loving celebrations of the academic life" (11). *Stoner* deals with many aspects of university or campus life, but none of them can be seen as the driving force of the narrative.

2. In her interpretation of *Stoner* as an example of the campus novel, Lorraine Zhenping Yang argues that the feeling of consolation that the novel provides actually "encourage[s] passivity in its readers in the face of the rapid destruction of the idea of a university, ultimately hastening and worsening the destruction of what it attempts to protect" (160). Yang's interpretation of the novel's recent popularity, as well as its limitations, is based on the idea that Stoner's love of literature "traps him within his inner world," making him "unable to escape solipsism" (162). In what follows, we contend that, in contrast, Stoner's love of literature in fact helps him forge and recognize a relationship between himself and the world as subject and object, and it is precisely this that makes the novel much more than a campus novel.

3. Barthes also deals with phenomenology of love in his book *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, but his (post-)structuralist exploration of love understands love mainly as a cultural and linguistic construct and seems more useful for explaining the unpopularity of *Stoner* at the time of its publication. For example, in theorizing love, Barthes focuses less on the redeeming power of love than on the absence or solitude inevitably involved in the amorous experience: "The lover's solitude is not a solitude of person . . . it is a solitude of system: I am alone in making a system out of it" (212). From this perspective, Stoner's love of literature and life would have been looked at as a traditional notion of love that seems rather outdated.

4. Megha Agarwal is right in this regard in suggesting that in assessing Stoner's approach to literature, "there is more at stake than the simple exegesis of a poem" (147). Being "continuously engaged in literal and metaphorical acts of translation and composition" (148), Stoner approaches literature with the kind of honesty and integrity available only to those deeply in love.

5. In stressing the importance of assessing Stoner's life in its totality, Frits Gåvertsson rightly focuses on "the role played by love and the way it colors his perception" (41), but does not consider the relationship between love and time.

6. In her book *What, Then, is Time?*, Eva Brann explains the difference between human beings and other beings in their relation to time as follows: "more-than-merely conscious beings, that is to say, self-conscious beings that have a self-acknowledged interiority, in short *human* beings, *have* past and future. Divinity is beyond time, while stones and stars, dustmites and even dolphins in their lovable congeniality are only *in* time, in *our* time" (xiv).

7. Intention and intuition are concepts developed by Edmund Husserl to explain the structures of consciousness. In Husserl's phenomenology, intention is the directing of one's attention to something, such as an object, event, or idea, and thus "carries no implication of future action as it does in common speech" (Falke 23). Intuition does not "suggest a kind of sixth sense" (Falke 23), either; instead, in Husserl's phenomenology, intuition "primarily expresses one's immediate cognitive relationship to the objects of knowledge" (Hintikka 174).

8. This is not to say that Stoner inherits no valuable virtues from his parents. As Andrew Rowcroft points out, the early life on his parents' farm is full of hardship and toil and grants Stoner the virtues of quietness and passivity, which help him avoid becoming "a victim of rash and impassioned decisions" (9). Nonetheless, these virtues do not automatically

lead to the generation of meaning until he falls in love with literature and thereby begins to have time.

9. Despite his perceptive reading of how the novel's prosaic style, in focusing on mundane objects, beautifully and almost poetically describes Stoner's transformed psyche through his liaison with Katherine, Lee Clark Mitchell argues that Stoner's love for Katherine simply intensifies rather than radically redefining his love for literature when he states that "Stoner's growing love for Katherine emerges in tandem with his love for literature, as he becomes ever more inspired by discovering how poems are created through a constellation of precisely placed words" (156).

10. Emily Abdeni-Holman similarly emphasizes how the novel presents meaning and life as ongoing processes. According to Abdeni-Holman, the novel refocuses "attention on living—a practice that is ongoing, a project, an activity, something subject to and unfolding in time, something that involves agency, something that changes—as opposed to life, which suggests something final, definite, and conclusive" (142).

11. D. Martin aptly describes the significance of this last moment of Stoner's life in stating that the "intensity and flow of the writing at the end of the book breaks on the reader with the same sense of profound insight that Shakespeare's sonnet brought to Stoner 40 years before" (1538). This perceptive analysis, however, does not proceed to notice the parallel between Shakespeare's sonnet and Stoner's book, into which Stoner breathes his life.

12. Most critics posit Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 as the main inspiration for the novel. Stoner's changing relationship with time through the development of his capacity to love, however, invokes a parallel between his life and another of Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet 18. Although he mainly discusses how the novel is built around Sonnet 73, Lee Clark Mitchell's analysis of the stylistic tension in the novel between "pedestrian, prosaic existence and a certain poetic release that accompanies a consciousness of self-transformation" (145) illuminates how *Stoner* effectively captures the process of Stoner's love of Shakespeare, ultimately helping him achieve what Shakespeare symbolizes: the power of writing to transcend time and immortalize one's love.

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