Stoner Study Guide

Stoner by John Williams

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

William Stoner is born into a farming family in rural Missouri in the late 1800s. He attends University and falls in love with English literature. He becomes a professor and teaches for decades through numerous personal and political struggles until his death. In his early life, Stoner knew only the farm and had scarcely traveled more than several miles away from it. When he is twenty he goes to the University of Missouri to study agriculture but winds up changing majors when he falls in love with English. Before his graduation, one of his teachers, Archer Sloane, sensing his love for literature, suggests that Stoner continue his studies and obtain his doctoral degree and Stoner accepts. Two of his friends, David Masters and Gordon Finch, leave the university to enlist and fight in World War I. They urge that he come along, but he decides against it after consulting with Sloane, who argues that armed conflict is antithetical to the creative, civilizing work of the intellectual. David Masters is killed in combat.

Stoner finishes his degree and is offered a job teaching at the University; he readily accepts. With the war over, veterans begin flooding back to the campus, including Finch. At a party thrown in their honor, Stoner meets Edith Bostwick and is immediately captivated by her. After a brief courtship and a visit to meet her parents, the two marry. They have problems from the start and she seems disgusted by him. She warms up to him only when she decides she wants a child and she ultimately gives birth to a daughter, Grace. She returns to her withdrawn self and most of the parental duties fall on Stoner.

The department is shaken up when Sloane dies of a heart attack. He was the director of the department and Gordon Finch, a dean now, fills in for him temporarily and hires on Hollis Lomax a young professor who suffers from an unfortunate deformity. Stoner is immediately drawn to him and when he comes to Stoner's house-warming party, the two find they have much in common intellectually.

Edith's father commits suicide at the onset of the Great Depression and she travels home for the funeral and while there undergoes a great change. She destroys everything her father gave to her and returns home with a new look. Stoner has also changed and found himself developing into the kind of teacher he had always wanted to be. Immediately, she finds every way to make his life miserable and even keeps Grace away from him.

Meanwhile, Stoner has an encounter with a graduate student named Charles Walker. Walker, a cripple, has been recommended to a seminar Stone is teaching by Lomax. Walker proves to be a poor student and an annoyance during the course and Stoner winds up failing him. Later, Stoner sits on the committee to determine whether Walker will continue his work at the university and insists that he be expelled. Lomax, however, sympathetic to the student, uses his new political clout as head of the English department to override Stoner's decision and develops a lifelong grudge against him.

During this time, Stoner begins to have a very fulfilling extramarital relationship with his former student, Katherine. The two, though shy initially, find great joy in one another, both intellectually and physically. Edith finds out about his affair but does not seem to particularly care. When Lomax finds out about it, however, he sees it as a valuable opportunity to punish Stoner and forces the two to break up. Katherine leaves the University and he never sees her again.

Stoner cleverly tricks Lomax into giving him a favorable schedule and, as he ages, he becomes a kind of living legend around campus, known for his various eccentricities. Meanwhile Grace, now an attractive young woman in college, announces that she is pregnant. At her mother's urging, she marries the father, who dies shortly before the birth in World War II. Grace develops a severe drinking problem and the child is raised by the father's parents. Not long after, Stoner, now in his sixties, finally decides to retire after the doctor finds a tumor in his intestines. His last days are spent in a dream-like state, his lucidity dwindling gradually. In his last moments, he looks at his only published book and dies.

Chapter I

Chapter I Summary

William Stoner is a boy born on a farm in rural Missouri who attended the University of Missouri in Columbia from his undergraduate degree to the completion of his PhD. He taught in the English department until he died in obscurity, leaving an unexceptional impression of the memory of those who had known him.

As a boy, Stoner's life is dedicated to farm work and he never really knew of life outside of it. One day, when he was about twenty years old, his father tells him that a county official had told him about a new program in agriculture at the University of Missouri and Stoner, with some hesitation, decides to go. Farming has become increasingly difficult, and he and his father thought learning about it at a university might prove useful. Stoner travels to Columbia to begin school and stays with cousins of his mother, the Footes, in exchange for doing work around their farm.

His first semester passes without any excitement, and he earns good but not exceptional grades. In his second semester, in addition to his agricultural courses, Stoner is required to take an introductory survey course in English taught by Archer Sloane. Stoner struggles in this class and has a hard time understanding the texts. In one dramatic situation, the professor exposes Stoner's ignorance in front of the entire class. Despite all of this, however, for the following semester, Stoner decides to drop his courses in agricultural science and focus on English. For the time being, he does not tell his parents and returns home to work on the farm over the summer.

Over the remaining three years, Stoner excels in English, earning straight A's in all of his classes. This invites the attention of Sloane, who recommends that Stoner stay at the university and earn his doctorate. Stoner, almost impulsively—though without any good idea about what he would do otherwise—accepts. After his undergraduate graduation, he tells his parents that he will not be returning to the farm. His attempts to explain what he is doing, and why he is doing it, are futile; his parents, though accepting his decision, are shocked and cannot understand.

Chapter I Analysis

It is interesting that Williams decides to begin the novel by summarizing Stoner's life story. From the outset, the reader knows the basic outline of the entire book, and thus even his surprising decision to switch from agriculture to English in his undergraduate studies is really no surprise. One possible reason for doing this might be that Williams wants to avoid the reader experiencing great surprise or excitement, especially in the first chapter. The life of Stoner is totally unexceptional, even what some might consider boring, and thus it is fitting that the narration of his life be unexceptional as well.

Also of note is that the reader has little access to the thoughts of Stoner. The reader does know that Stoner is nervous about telling his parents about his change of plans before he actually makes the change. The reader knows only that Stoner decides to stop studying agricultural—which he seems to understand well and finds at least somewhat useful—to study English, which he has struggled in and does not immediately comprehend. This narrative method, however, makes a little more sense later in the chapter, for, Stoner himself does not seem to understand why he likes English, nor does he know what he wants to do with. It is not until Sloane tells Stoner that he is in love with the subject and will be a teacher does the situation make sense to him. The nature of the attraction, as yet, is unclear.

Chapters II and III

Chapters II and III Summary

Chapter II begins with the outbreak of World War I in Europe, though America is not yet involved. This news comes only a few weeks after Stoner's graduation and it becomes a hot topic of discussion around the university, though its reality does not really penetrate Stoner, and he becomes even more fixated on his studies and more immersed in his passion for knowledge. After completing his Master's degree, Stoner starts teaching a few classes, but finds himself unable to convey the material with what he feels is its proper significance and it is in the role of the student that he continues to find himself the happiest.

Stoner begins to become friendly with two other doctoral students in the English department, Gordon Finch and David Masters and the three have a weekly Friday get-together at a local pub. Finch is a mediocre intellect whose presence in the English department is due to convenience and practicality rather than a real interest. Masters, on the other hand, is, to Stoner, impressively intelligent, but is he also cynical. He views the University, not as Stoner does—a center for knowledge and enlightenment—but as a kind of asylum to protect people too useless to survive in the world or to protect the world from people too intelligent. Into the first category, he places Stoner and Finch; into the second, himself.

America is, before long, dragged into the War after the sinking of the Lusitania. Finch tells Stoner that he will be leaving the University to enlist and tells Stoner he should join as well. Masters, apparently, has also planned to enlist, to Stoner's surprise. As it turns out, Masters is really only interested in seeking adventure; like Stoner, he is not moved by any feelings of patriotism. Masters, too, says Stoner should enlist, but Stoner says he will need to talk to Sloane first. When he brings up the question to Sloane, he is immediately met with a fit of rage. When Sloane cools down, he explains that he is frustrated at how many students the University is losing and then explains that he has a kind of philosophical opposition to it. War, he argues, has a tendency to destroy the kind of civilization that men of learning—like himself and Stoner—build up. He assures Stoner, however, that he will have a place at the University when he returns, should he decide to enlist and warns him that there may be some repercussions—socially, one assumes—if he stays. After a few days of deliberation, Stoner decides not to enlist and files for an exception from the draft. Finch, predictably, is upset. Sloane appears to be glad that Stoner will stay, but his entire personality has become filled with gloom. Shortly after finishing up his doctorate, news comes that Masters was killed in combat.

In Chapter III, Sloane offers Stoner a job as an instructor at the University. He is relieved because it means he will not have to look for work elsewhere and the University of Missouri has become a kind of intellectual home for him. After he accepts, he realizes how much Sloane appears to have aged during the past few years. Sloane's entire personality seems to be mired in despair and whatever joy he once had in teaching

seems to have been lost. He looks like a dying man. Between Sloane and the death of Masters, Stoner's thoughts shift naturally to the topic of death. Hitherto, its reality had been far from him; death was only a thing of literature or, at most, something of biological interest. Now, in Masters, he has a concrete example before his eyes, and it is difficult for him to fully comprehend. Thus, he turns his research efforts towards it.

As Stoner starts the new semester—inheriting many of the classes Sloane no longer wants to or is no longer able to teach, including the same course that first sparked his interest in English—and shortly after news arrives that a cease-fire has been signed in Europe. Stoner is initially swept up in the elation that engulfs the campus, and in the course of it passes by the office of Sloane. He sees Sloane weeping, a destroyed a man, and leaves the campus celebrations.

Finch, and the others who enlisted in the war effort and survive, return to campus. A party is arranged in their honor and Stoner attends. The crowds of people are intimidating to the shy Stoner, but he sees a woman whose beauty and elegance captivates him. He asks Finch to introduce him to her. Her name is Edith Elaine Bostwick and she is visiting from St. Louis. She and Stoner talk for awhile and have a pleasant conversation. He asks if he can see her again soon and she unemotionally says yes.

He visits her at her aunt's house, where she is staying while she is in Columbia, and after a brief conversation with her aunt, he is able to see her. They have a short, awkward conversation and he—perhaps aggressively—asks if he can see her as much as possible while she is still in town. She is taken aback and Stoner is about to leave out of embarrassment when she begins to recount, as if reading from a book, her life story. Over the next few weeks, he sees her nearly everyday and on her last day there, he confesses his love for her and asks her to marry him. Again, she is taken aback, and this time tells him that she will need to discuss it with her parents and will send him a letter soon.

A few weeks later, Stoner receives a letter with no definite answer but with an invitation to visit her and her family in St. Louis. He visits the family but sees very little of Edith at first. Her parents are very wealthy and he talks with them at some length about various trivialities. Finally, the topic of his marriage proposal come up and her parents are concerned that his modest income as a professor will not suit their daughter, who has been accustomed to a life of privilege. Nonetheless, when Edith finally appears, her parents give their blessing and she accepts. Without including Stoner in the discussion, Edith and her parents argue over the timing of the wedding—Edith is insistent that it take place as soon as possible—and Stoner goes home, promised that he will receive a letter with the wedding plans soon.

Chapters II and III Analysis

The war features prominently into these chapters and one must wonder whether Williams is trying to make a larger political point with it. The timing is certainly there:

Stoner was published in 1965, in the midst of the Vietnam War. Sloane's reaction to World War I, and the patriotism which engulfed the nation and the University corpus, could surely find its parallels in the academia that Williams was familiar with. In any case, as depicted, the academic environment does have a certain separation—or insulation—from the political events of the world. The war hardly feels real to Stoner and he has no real feelings of national pride that would make him even think of enlisting. Finch, perhaps a kind of emissary of the "real world," has these feelings, but for Masters it is an adventure and little more. Ultimately, though, Stoner seems to be swayed by Sloane's opinion: The intellectual life is about creation and progress; war causes destruction and regression. The two are opposites, and it is not fitting that the intellectual should actively take part in the destruction of his own work. Sloane's deterioration is perhaps symbolic of the very destruction that he predicted would happen.

These chapters also explore the nature of Stoner's introversion. In Chapter I it was already obvious Stoner was not a particularly social man; he had no real friends to speak of, nor did he seem to make any attempt to have any. As his studies progress, Stoner seems to draw even more into himself, and it is described as an almost natural process. There is a certain quality and excitement which the intellectual cannot easily communicate to others, and certainly not to those who do not share his passion. Since the intellectual life is Stoner's great love and joy in life, and what he occupies himself with almost constantly, it makes sense that he would not be able to easily relate with others, nor does he seem particularly inclined to do so (even though he was aware of feeling lonely), at least until he meets Edith.

His initial attraction to Edith is probably purely physical, as his interest in being introduced to her is based on little more than a few glances and hearing her speak a few words. As they get to know each other, it is possible that their attraction—a very cool, obscured attraction, to be sure—is based largely on the fact that both of them are terribly shy. Neither has an easy time opening up and being vulnerable to the other, and thus Edith's awkward outburst explaining her life story can really be seen as a tender moment: She is doing something she dreads—opening up—because she does not want Stoner to go away rejected. In fact, it was an act of such sacrifice for her that the narrator says she would never repeat it.

Chapters IV and V

Chapters IV and V Summary

At the beginning of Chapter IV, Edith and Stoner are about to be married in Columbia at her aunt's house where their first meetings took place. Stoner's parents come to town to meet Edith right before the wedding and they have an awkward but courteous conversation before leaving. The wedding is held the next day and Stoner is filled with anxiety. Finch, perhaps noticing this, tries to take charge of the situation and reassure his friend. The couple is married and almost immediately after the ceremony Edith disappears. Later that day, Stoner finally locates her finds her with her aunt and her mother, the latter is sobbing and Edith is clearly upset herself. The Bostwicks disappears and Stoner does not see his wife again until they are preparing to leave for their honeymoon in St. Louis after the reception.

On the way to the hotel, Edith's mood seems to lighten a little, and they even start to have fun with each other, talking excitedly about their future together. When they finally arrive at the hotel it is late and Edith is evidently too tired for sex. Feeling more than a little rejected, Stoner sleeps on the couch. Edith's pleasant mood continues into the next day though, and once again they have a fun time with each other. Edith tenses up again when night comes and the question of sex appears. Perhaps knowing she cannot escape it forever, she lets him have sex with her, but vomits afterward. She claims it was the second glass of champagne that made her sick.

In Chapter V, Edith and Stoner cut their honeymoon short and return to Columbia, ostensibly to get settled in at their new apartment. Upon arrival, Edith works tirelessly almost compulsively scrubbing every inch of it clean from invisible dirt, refusing any help Stoner offers. Their marriage is immediately strained. She is distant and cold to him and their only sexual relations occur when she is half-asleep at night. Whenever Stone tries to address their problems, Edith tenses up and withdraws from him even further.

Though aware of her shyness, Stoner insists that they entertain guests. She agrees and the social occasions seem to open her up, and she even affects spouse-like warmth for him during the events. As soon as their guests leave, however, the warmth disappears and Edith returns to her normal, withdrawn ways. On one occasion, when they are entertaining Finch and his fiancée, Edith's usual appearance of normality breaks down and when reminded of the plans for Europe she abandoned to marry Stoner, she breaks down in tears and locks herself in their bedroom. Finch tries to be reassuring, and he leaves with his fiancée, and Stoner sleeps on the sofa.

After the breakdown, Edith calms down a little but refuses to have anyone over to their apartment other than her aunt, who stays with her everyday until Stoner returns, at which point she abruptly leaves. Stoner decides to busy himself with work and takes on as many responsibilities as possible, even beginning work on turning his doctoral thesis into a book.

One day, before Stoner heads to work, Edith informs him that she wants a baby. Surprised, he asks her if she is sure, and she responds, annoyed that he would ask, that she is. After he leaves for work, she undresses herself and, after looking at her body in a mirror for a moment, lays naked in bed for hours waiting for him to come him. When he does, she pulls him to herself with a sexual passion he had not known before, and this passion continues for the next two months until she becomes pregnant. After three days of labor, their child, a girl named Grace, is born, and Edith remains bed-ridden for nearly a year afterwards, leaving nearly all of the parenting responsibilities to Stoner. Edith sees little of her daughter, and seems to look at her as a kind of stranger; Stoner, for his part, finds an outlet for the love and affection his relationship with Edith lacks.

Chapters IV and V Analysis

What exactly motivates Edith, and her sudden changes of mood, is a total mystery, a feeling which the reader is surely meant to share with Stoner. There are at least two possible explanations for her behavior; both, to some extent, probably play a role. First, the economic disparity between Stoner's background and Edith's is an issue before the marriage occurs, first brought up by her father. One assumes this is why Edith's mother is so upset by the wedding—one must assume that something more is going on than the tears mothers often shed seeing their daughter finally married and "all grown up." It is also a reasonable explanation for Edith's almost compulsive cleaning of the apartment: It is so meager and cheap that she has to "clean it up" to fit her standards.

However, she also has some obvious sexual issues which are much more dominant and severe. On their honeymoon, they are able to get along very well—better than they ever got along before, at least so far as the reader is aware—but that changes when they have sex. Edith is totally disgusted by the act, and surely Stoner's physical appearance is not to blame. (His appearance has not been described in detail, and he is probably not incredibly handsome, but he is certainly not grotesque.) There are also signs of shame in her embarrassment in undressing in front of him and what appears to be an attempt to reassure herself when she inspects her body in front of the mirror. By the time Williams wrote this novel, psychology was a well-established field, and, as an academic, he was likely at least somewhat aware of its progress. It is not unreasonable, then, to think that Edith was the victim of some kind of sexual trauma as a child which makes the act unbearable for her.

Chapters VI and VII

Chapters VI and VII Summary

In Chapter VI, Sloane is found dead in his office from a heart attack. Stoner attends the funeral as one of the pall-bearers, and very few people are in attendance. As he watches the coffin descend into the ground, he weeps, not knowing whether his tears are for Sloane or himself. He drives back with Gordon Finch, who comments that something about Sloane's death reminds him of David Masters' death.

With Sloane's death, there is a need to fill his role as director of the English department. Finch fills this role temporarily and hires a man named Hollis Lomax as assistant professor to cover Sloane's teaching duties. Lomax does not arrive until shortly before the beginning of the semester and his arrival is much anticipated by his colleagues. He is a deformed man who has a bitter, ironic sense of humor. He prefers to keep to himself and declines every social invitation extended to him, including Stoner's. Stoner is disappointed because he wishes to know Lomax better, largely because he reminds him of Masters.

Life at Stoner's house continues as it had. Edith stays mainly in her room while Stoner takes care of Grace and works. One day, Edith decides to visit her parent's home with the baby for a week, but returns after only a few days, citing the exhaustion of taking care of Grace. She brings with her a check for six-thousand dollars—a loan from her father—to buy a house. Stoner resists, but she angrily insists, saying that she hates living in an apartment. He grudgingly accepts, knowing that the payments on the loan will be nearly half of his meager salary. They find a house which will require a bit of work and move in. They decide to throw a house-warming party and invite most of the department, including Lomax; to Stoner's surprise, he accepts. Edith has a near-breakdown before the party while getting everything prepared, but is her normal, superficially in-control self during it. Stoner and a drunken Lomax talk at some length until late in the night, and Stoner realizes they have much in common.

The financial burden of the house is as heavy as Stoner thought it would be, but he does not altogether regret the decision, taking some pride in owning property. e spends a considerable amount of effort remodeling his basement study, realizing all the while that his desire to remake the study is symbolic of a desire to remake himself. Stoner finds himself more or less happy with his new situation, except for the distance from Edith, which he at least has come to accept. His book had received neither extremely favorable or unfavorable reviews, but he feels quite content with his work and even proud of himself.

In Chapter VII, Stoner receives a phone call informing him of his father's death at their farm. He immediately travels home for the funeral. Afterwards, he tries to convince his mother to live with him and Edith, but she refuses, and he realizes that she just wants to

die where she lived, and accepts her decision. She dies not long after and he lets the black servant, Tobe, stay on the farm and keep its crops until its sale the following year.

Soon after, the stock market crashes, marking the beginning of the Great Depression. The city of Columbus is largely unaffected at first—few people owned stocks—but fears begin to grow at the news of a large bank failure in St. Louis. Edith calls her parents, who reassured her everything will be fine. A few days later, however, her father commits suicide, overwhelmed by the financial ruin of his family and the firm he worked for. However, the ruin is not quite so bad as he thought and her mother is able to scrape together enough of an income to survive on her own.

Edith travels to St. Louis to spend time with her mother for a few months while Stoner works in Columbus and takes care of Grace. During this time without Edith, he realizes that he is happy and begins to almost dread her return. He finds himself developing into the teacher he always wanted to be and is better able to convey his passion for the subject to his students. Edith, upon her return, instantly notices this change. She has changed herself—she has a new style of clothes and a new hairstyle—and Stoner infers that this indicates that she has come back to "make war."

Chapters VI and VII Analysis

Now middle-aged—Stoner is around thirty-nine years old when the stock market crashes—Stoner is starting to finally come into himself, a process symbolized by the remodeling of his study. Stoner's intellectual life has always been a kind of fortress he can retreat to from the world, and his study is becoming exactly that in the microcosm of his house; at one point, the narrator says that Edith does not seem to know that it exists.

Stoner realizes that his true happiness will always be intellectual and that he does not need Edith to be happy. In fact, he is happier without her around, as she is often a source of stress and trouble. With time to reflect on his own state and live like did he when he was a graduate student, he is able to turn himself into the kind of teacher he wanted to be: He finds himself able to bridge, in some measure, the gulf he once perceived between his words and his thoughts. He can transmit some portion of his passion for English literature to his students.

One quality that has been totally lacking so far for Stoner is any sense of professional ambition. One must surely wonder at Finch's success. During their years as graduate students, it was fairly obvious that Finch's intellect was pretty average and his interest in English (and really knowledge in general), weak. Yet, he is able to somehow rise in the administration of the school and sets himself up as temporary director of the English department. One would think, perhaps, that this would attract the resentment and jealousy of Stoner, who could easily feel that he deserves it more than Finch. Yet, Stoner, as of yet, has not aired a single complaint. Indeed, he is proud of himself for the publication of his book and his teaching ability. He seems to be singly dedicated to knowledge and to passing it on.

Chapters VIII and IX

Chapters VIII and IX Summary

In Chapter VIII, the narrator explains that the change in Edith had started when she was home in St. Louis. At her father's funeral, she had remained calm and emotionless and afterwards she secluded herself for days in her room. Methodically, she went through her old childhood belongings and destroyed everything her father gave her. She decided she wanted to be a new person and destroyed almost all of her clothes and bought new ones with money borrowed from her mother.

Upon returning to Columbia, incensed perhaps at Stoner's own change, she begins to live her new life. She becomes involved in a theater company, volunteering her time to build sets and inviting over her friends frequently. For Stoner, life goes on as normal. He logs long hours working in his study while Grace plays or does her homework nearby. Gradually, Edith's renewed social life tapers off and she spends her time alone again. One night Stoner becomes excited about his work and his joy flows over to Grace and they both start laughing. Edith storms into his study and lectures Stoner about making Grace spend so much time alone and unhappy and demands that Grace come with her. Confused, the little girl does and Edith establishes a new pattern of keeping Grace occupied with friends or various activities that do not involve Stoner. As a result, Grace recedes from his life. Stoner confronts Edith about this, imploring her not to use Grace against him, but she denies any such motive. The next day, Stoner finds his study has been pillaged; Edith has moved his belongings out to make room for an art studio of her own. He realizes she has no intention of making life easy for him at home, and so he finds himself spending more and more time at the university.

In Chapter IX, Stoner is sitting in his office at the university when a graduate student, Charles Walker, comes in and asks to be let into Stoner's already full seminar on the influence of the Latin literary tradition on Renaissance literature. He explains that he has only two years left to finish his doctorate and still needs to take four seminars, and since students are only allowed to take one per semester, he will be in trouble if he cannot get into Stoner's. Stoner agrees and says he will see him when the class next meets.

The seminar meets and Stoner, noticing that Walker has not yet showed up, begins, and immediately makes a connection with his class. The students are beginning to grasp the importance of the material he is presenting. Walker arrives late and noisily makes his way to a seat, interrupting the class. His presence becomes only more interruptive as he asks a number of impertinent questions. Afterwards, Stoner goes Lomax's office. Lomax had suggested that Walker take Stoner's seminar. Stoner asks about Walker's unusual behavior. Lomax gets a bit angry and suggests that it is possibly because Walker is a cripple, but assures Stoner that he is a fine student. Walker's disruptive behavior continues, however, and he clearly does not understand the material. Despite this, the seminar turns out to be one of Stoner's most fruitful classes ever. All of the students are required to give presentations at the end of the semester and one student,

a young woman named Katherine Driscoll who is merely auditing the class, asks to present even though she is not required to do so; Stoner happily allows her.

As the time for Walker to present approaches, he makes up numerous excuses to put it off. In the meantime, Katherine gives her presentation on the influence of Donatus on Shakespeare, and Stoner is very impressed with it. He compliments her on it after class, but she gives him a confused reaction and leaves without responding. Walker is told he must present the next week if he wishes to pass the course. He shows up with a few papers in his hand and gives what is clearly an unprepared, though eloquent, attack on the position presented by Katherine the previous week. Stoner is enraged, but lets Walker finish. Afterwards, he detains Walker and apologizes to Katherine for allowing him to go on; she is unperturbed, however, and says that the attack was really on him, Dr. Stoner, and not her. Stoner returns to the class and scolds Walker for his failure to meet the assignment, threatening to fail him; Walker will not concede any wrongdoing and Stoner leaves as Walker yells at him, warning that he has not heard the last of him.

Chapters VIII and IX Analysis

Chapter VIII confirms, at least somewhat, psychological theories about Edith which may have started to form in the reader's mind in the previous chapter. Even to a relative layman, her behavior so far would seem to suggest sexual abuse as a child and now, with the death of her father, she clearly feels released from some kind of bondage, symbolized by her destruction of all the toys he gave her and her change of appearance. How exactly this change is manifesting itself in her is not totally clear. Her attitude towards Stoner appears to have changed from disgust or indifference to hatred, and she is actively trying to get him out of her life, to the extent that is possible. One plausible explanation is that her new attitude involves a kind of general suspicion towards men, seeing her father in all of them. This would also further explain (in addition to wanting undermine him generally) why she would want to get Grace away from him: She will not let Grace become a victim like herself.

The nature of her intrusion is symbolic. Heretofore, his study has been a symbol of his inner, intellectual life, and now Edith is physically intruding into it, even destroying it. In other words, she is destroying his inner peace and violating a new boundary which had been sacred up to this point. It seems, though, that this reorientation of Stoner's life is in some way accidentally beneficial, however. He is able to find joy and peace once again when he returns to learning merely for its own sake. Perhaps his intellectual life had become stifled by the desire to write a new book, merely for the sake of being published. In other words, his intellectual life had become tainted by ambition, and when it was thrown in disarray, he was able to rearrange it, much like he had to physically rearrange where the business of study would take place.

So far, the nature of the relationship between Walker and Lomax is unclear. In particular, it is not obvious why Lomax should be so defensive of such a clearly bad student. The obvious theory would be that he sympathizes with Walker's deformity—Lomax is deformed himself, after all—and wishes that people be a bit more tolerant of him. One

would imagine that such sympathy would have its limits, however, but Walker's threat at the end of Chapter IX presumably is based on his relationship with Lomax.

Chapter X

Chapter X Summary

Finch questions Stoner about a complaint he had received regarding the incident with Charles Walker. After Stoner explains the situation, Finch dismisses it and agrees with Stoner's conduct. He then asks Stoner if, being the senior member of the department, he had any interest in being the new head of the department, but Stoner says he does not.

The department decides to let Walker stay for his oral examinations and, by virtue of department policy, Stoner must serve on his examining committee. Stoner tries to get out of it, but the policy is inflexible. Stoner, the two other committee members—Lomax and and new professor named Holland—Finch and Rutherford, a dean, are present for the examination. Each committee member receives forty-five minutes to question Walker. Lomax begins and everyone in the room, including Stoner, is impressed by how intelligent he appears and how well he seems to know the subject of his thesis. Holland takes his turn questioning him and Stoner's initial hopes are dashed. He realizes that whenever a question is asked that Walker cannot answer—which happens frequently—Lomax interrupts with a "clarification" which virtually gives away the answer to Walker and allows him to give the appearance of competence. Thus, when it is Stoner's turn to question, he refuses to let Lomax interrupt while he asks Walker a series of questions testing his basic knowledge of the history of literature. Predictably, Walker fails to answer the questions sufficiently. When the three convene afterwards to assess Walker's performance, Lomax is insistent that they pass him and Stoner is insistent that they fail him. Holland is torn between the two. However, it is required that the committee be unanimous for Walker to pass. Before a decision can be finally made, however, it is suggested that they wait a few days to consider their decision, and they do.

Stoner meets soon after with Finch to discuss the issue. Finch tells him that Lomax will be appointed the new head of the department and that it could spell trouble for Stoner's career. Stoner is unmoved by this and refuses to pass Walker merely out of political fear. He cites something said decades ago by David Masters, that the university is a kind of asylum for those not fit to be in the world: Walker, Stoner says, is the world Master's was talking about, and it will ruin academia if people like Walker are allowed in. Seeing that Stoner will not change his mind, Finch summons Lomax. Lomax is still livid and informs the two that he plans on bringing charges for unethical behavior against Stoner if he does not change his vote. He says, citing various facts and circumstances surrounding Walker's experience in Stoner's seminar, that Stoner's treatment of Walker has been prejudicial and unfair. Finch refuses to hear any of it and Lomax leaves. The two puzzle over Lomax's devotion to Walker.

Lomax receives the chairmanship of the department and when the schedule is released for the following semester, Stoner is not surprised to see that his schedule is not at all favorable. He patiently and without complaint accepts his classes and teaches them to

the best of his ability, but begins to have thoughts about leaving the University of Missouri to teach elsewhere. He brings the subject up with Edith, but she will not hear it; it would be too disruptive for her life and for Grace's life. Finally, she threatens that she will just live with her aunt and take Grace with her if he decides to move. Stoner drops the issue.

Chapter X Analysis

The conflict with Walker and Lomax helps to clarify Stoner's philosophy towards the idea of the university. Though he cites Masters' comparison of the university to an asylum, it is clear he is twisting Masters' meaning to fit his own. Masters' original point was that those inside the university were generally too useless to be in the real world; if they were left outside, they would perhaps starve to death. The real world, then, has at least a kind of practical superiority over academia. It is clear Stoner does not accept such a conclusion. Nor does Stoner accept Masters' notion that some men are so intelligent that the world imprisons them in the university.

Rather, it is the university that must be protected from the world, and he sees in Walker a worldly invasion into his academic world. Just as the study is—or was—Stoner's private refuge from his wife's madness, so too is the university a refuge from the calamities of the nation. In fact, the analogy goes further than this. The study is a symbol of Stoner's private, intellectual life; the university, then, is a symbol of society's intellectual life. Without his intellectual life, Stoner is restless and unhappy; it follows then that a nation that has compromised its intellectual life is unhappy, too. The reader should note that this philosophy, inferred from Stoner's principled stand against the passage of Walker, fits nicely with the philosophy implicit in Archer Sloane's own words and behavior: The intellectual builds something in society and the world, often, tears it down. World War I tore it down, and it killed Sloane. By refusing to do anything to aid Walker in becoming a teacher, Stoner sees himself as continuing the quiet legacy of Sloane.

Chapters XI and XII

Chapters XI and XII Summary

Chapter XI begins with Stoner's acknowledgment that his campaign to keep Walker out of the graduate program had failed. Lomax and the dean had managed to engineer away around usual university policies and allow Walker to continue his studies. Admitting defeat, Stoner tries to appeal to Lomax, hoping to make their relationship, if not friendly or cordial, at least professional; even the students, Stoner points out, are noticing the tension. Lomax is relentless, however, and suggests that Stoner's prejudice against Walker stemmed from Walker's disability. Stoner soon realizes that his status among the students has changed as a result of the conflict, polarizing their reactions either to fierce loyalty or scared avoidance.

Life for Stoner has become dull and unhappy. His classes are boring and unfulfilling, by Lomax's design; his daughter's schedule is such that he is barely able to see her, by Edith's design. A gray lethargy has descended upon him and his intellectual life has ground to a halt. He begins even to question the value of living, though in an abstract way; the actual idea of suicide does not occur to him. One snowy night, while cooped up in his office, he stares into the landscape and loses himself for a moment, nearly having an out-of-body experience and projecting himself into the universe.

In Chapter XII, these strange out-of-body experiences continue from time to time as little in his life has changed. He has begun to notice, with some shock, how much time has passed and how he has aged. Lost in a reverie one day while grading papers, he is visited by his former student, Katherine Driscoll. He had previously promised that he would read her dissertation, and now she is taking him up on it. He agrees to read it by next Friday; she thanks him and leaves. For days, the dissertation sits on his desk, not from procrastination, but out of fear that he will enjoy it too much. Finally, Friday afternoon he begins to read it and his hopes and fears are confirmed; though in a rough stage, it shows great promise. Unfortunately, when he returns to his office, he realizes he has missed his appointment with her by over an hour. He looks up her address and visits her. They talk about the dissertation and the seminar—a sore subject for him still—and he leaves.

Stoner is drawn to her, however, and finds various reasons to keep visiting her: a book she might find useful, to help her with a translation, or any of a variety of academic pretexts. Though he is sure he is beginning to develop feelings for her, he is certain she does not feel the same way. In time, he feels his presence burdensome to her, and he gradually stops his visits, though not seeing her requires a great deal of willpower. One day, several weeks after his last visit, he overhears a fellow teacher mention that Katherine Driscoll is sick. Impulsively, he decides to visit her and finds her pale and depressed. She is not sick, however; she has been "desperately unhappy," she says. He confesses his feelings for and, to his surprise, she does feel the some way. Thus

begins a love affair between them which fulfills Stoner in a way he had never experienced before.

Chapters XI and XII Analysis

With Lomax's takeover of the department, and Stoner's failure to expel Walker from the program, Stoner's fears about the infection of the department by the spirit of the world are, to an extent, confirmed. Lomax's rule is arbitrary, personal, and political; it is not dedicated to sound teaching or the expansion of knowledge. Rather, he is driven by his personal vendetta—a kind of passionate affirmative action on behalf of the disabled Walker, even—to ruin the career of a certainly talented professor. Stoner has little hope to escape the situation. He cannot leave Columbia without losing contact with his daughter (one assumes he could not care less about not seeing Edith) and his intellectual life, perhaps out of depression or perhaps because he cannot teach anything of interest, has ground to a halt.

He is in desperate need of reinvigoration, and he finds this is Katherine Driscoll. From her presentation in his seminar he was impressed by her and perhaps had a nascent attraction to her. Of course, he realizes that an affair would greatly complicate his life, and he does not think himself terribly desirable anyway. Thus, he views reading her dissertation with dread; he fears it will aggravate his attraction towards her and set himself up for heartbreak.

It is interesting to note some similarities between Katherine and Edith. First of all, the two have similar physical features—at least, both are tall and slender. Second, Katherine, like Edith, is shy and this shyness is so extreme that in both cases Stoner takes it for rejection. Of course, his relationship with Katherine, at least so far, is successful; that could hardly be said for his marriage to Edith. Katherine, then, is a kind of realization of the dream that he had for Edith; she is the woman that Stoner wished Edith to be.

Chapters XIII and XIV

Chapters XIII and XIV Summary

As Chapter XIII opens, Stoner and Katherine are joyously continuing their affair. It shocks Stoner—and Katherine—to find that the joys of the intellectual life could find such a complement in the joys of the flesh. Conventional wisdom said that the two opposed one another, but they rejoice in proving the conventional wisdom wrong. Conventional wisdom also said that an adulterous affair should hurt Stoner's marriage, but he finds that it strangely makes domestic life more comfortable for him; he and Edith are even friendlier. For awhile, he thinks Edith is unaware of Katherine but she had found out, somehow, from nearly the beginning. Her reaction surprises him: She does not seem to really care; perhaps, at most, she is a little annoyed. As the fall semester begins, his affair continues on, but whereas he once boldly and unashamedly entered her apartment, he now begins to approach it with more stealth.

Gradually, it becomes obvious that their affair is well-known, but there are no immediate repercussions; like Edith, no one seems to really care. When Edith leaves for St. Louis for a week, Stoner and Katherine escape together on a secret vacation to the Ozarks and spend their only prolonged period of time together. When they return, Finch calls Stoner in to talk to him about his affair, cautioning him that it could ruin him if it becomes too well known. Finch is trying help Stoner, however; he wants to protect him from his own actions, and seems even willing to help cover the affair up to an extent. When Stoner sees Katherine, he tells her about it, and she becomes worried. They now dedicate themselves to secrecy and take great pains that they provide the existing rumors with no more foundation.

Their efforts are in vain, however: Lomax has found out about them and, essentially, is threatening to fire Katherine if Stoner does not resign. Finch, again, takes Stoner's side, but there is little he can do, realistically. He does say that if he ends the affair, that perhaps the entire thing can blow over. Stoner considers all of his options and tells Finch he will need time to think. His only hesitation in leaving Edith is a substantial one: Grace. He talks with Katherine and gradually they resign themselves to the fact that their relationship must end, noting with gloom that if there were truly the creatures of the intellect they thought they were, mere jobs or family ties would not hold them back. Katherine gives her resignation and leaves town almost immediately.

As Chapter XIV opens, Stoner has come down with a severe flu over the next summer. It takes a heavy toll on him and when he returns—for he did not teach over the summer—he has aged considerably and noticeably. His personality has also changed. He has become sharper, ruder, and more direct with his colleagues, though he remains gentle and patient with his students. He sees the events of World War I beginning to replay themselves with Europe as, in 1937, the Nazis fan the flames of the Spanish Civil War and general turmoil begins to brew in Europe. He reflects upon Sloane, and sees

himself taking much the same attitude towards war, the force which destroys the intellect's work. Unlike Sloan, however, he does not let the attitude consume him.

Fed up with miserable schedules, Stoner decides to do something about it. He tosses out the syllabus of one of his sections of General English—a syllabus drafted and mandated by the Lomax-run English department—and decides to treat it like an upper level course on Medieval literature like he once taught.His students complain in droves and he meets with the head of the freshman English program, Mr. Ehrhardt. Ehrhardt conveys Lomax's concerns and tries to get Stoner to fall in line with the syllabus, but Stoner refuses. Lomax, desperate, appeals to Finch. Finch, however, refuses to do anything about it; it would not be right for an administrator to micromanage the course taught by a senior professor. He sly implies that the only way for Lomax to fix the problem is to give Stoner the kind of schedule he wants and allow him to teach upper level courses. Reluctantly, Lomax concedes.

Chapters XIII and XIV Analysis

Williams seems to be taking a bit of conscious delight in presenting an image of an adulterous affair as something which is not only healthy for the individuals involved, but fulfilling in as complete a way as it is for Katherine and Stoner. It is not even harmful for the people one would think it would be: Edith, who has long given up on love, views it almost indifferently. If anything, marriage and social customs are obstacles to the true love between Katherine and Stoner; obstacles, one suspects, Williams thinks should not exist.

It would be wrong to fit the relationship between Katherine and Stoner into the mold repeated so many times in other novels and movies: a passionate romance, doomed from the start by its immoral roots. Though their relationship does come to an end, it does so in a way that is far from moralizing. There is no reason their affair could not have continued indefinitely if not for the vindictive and irrational malice of Lomax. Indeed, Williams seems to almost endorse extramarital affairs when he writes: "In his forty-third year William Stoner learned what others, much younger, had learned before him: that the person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last . . ." (194).

Finally, it should not surprise the reader that Williams, in the midst of a novel which so strongly advocates the role of the intellect, not only in the happiness of the individual, but in the health of a nation, should provide an image of love which is intimately tied to the intellectual life. The two lovers take a conscious delight in refuting, by their own counterexample, the traditional wisdom that the joys of the flesh are incompatible with the joys of the intellect, and no better illustration of this could be given than the two alternating between bouts of study and bouts of sex.

Chapters XV, XVI, and XVII

Chapters XV, XVI, and XVII Summary

In Chapter XV, Stoner starts to become a kind of living legend around campus. Stories about his confrontation with Lomax abound, most of them with little more than a tenuous connection to the truth. As the years pass, Stoner adds to the legend by his growing eccentricity in the classroom. He habitually becomes so immersed in the subject material he is teaching that he falls into a trance-like state from which he can be retrieved only with difficulty. As he ages, he becomes increasingly indifferent to his domestic situation and finds it easier to spend more time at home. Edith tries to again wage war with him, but her screams and insults do not move him and she gives up. Edith starts to gradually deteriorate mentally. She starts babbling to herself while sculpting (the form of art she decided was her favorite) and addresses Stoner and Grace only in the third person.

Grace, at this point, is now twelve years old and has withdrawn in her own way. Concerned, Edith tries to push Grace into having a more outgoing social life, hoping that her daughter will become popular at school. Edith eventually gives up, however, and Grace remains socially isolated and puts on a considerable amount of weight. Stoner looks on his daughter with some sadness, but cannot feel responsible, since he has for so long been separated from his daughter by Edith. As Grace matures, she loses her weight and grows into her womanhood; finally, she becomes the popular girl her mother had wanted. As high school graduation approaches, the question of Grace's continued school arises. Stoner had been saving money to send her away to school somewhere, perhaps on the East coast; Edith refuses, though, and insists that she stay there. Grace seems almost resigned to her mother's will and accepts it without expressing a preference either way. She enrolls at the University of Missouri.

Grace's social life continues in much the same way after her enrollment at the University: The phone keeps ringing for her and friends come and go in their cars. One day Stoner is in the kitchen when he hears a loud scream from Edith's studio. He runs down to find Edith out of sorts and Grace is sitting in her chair calmly. Grace is pregnant and Edith is disgusted, blaming Stoner's blood for her immorality. Stoner makes Edith leave and talks to Grace alone. She had gotten pregnant by a boy named Ed Frye; she seems to have no particularly strong feelings for him. The next day, Edith insists that the boy's family be contacted and that the wedding be arranged immediately. Stoner tries to stand up for Grace—who has shown no indication of a desire to marry Ed Frye—but Grace, again, calmly accepts her mother's wishes. The two are married soon after. Ed leaves almost immediately after the marriage to fight in World War II and, just as quickly, news reaches home of his death.

In Chapter XVI the wartime years are taking a serious toll on Stoner. Constant news of death and destruction weighs down his soul and the aging process, already too advanced for his age, accelerates. Meanwhile, he learns that Grace has developed a

severe drinking problem. She lives on her own now, on the modest stipend provided by the government, and Ed's parents do most of the work in raising her child. She admits to Stoner that getting pregnant was a kind of ploy to get out of Columbia and away from her family.

After the war, Stoner enjoys some of the happiest years of his life. The universities teem with people returning from the war and Stoner continues to pursue his research with great intensity. His former lover, Katherine Driscoll publishes a book and he is moved to tears when he sees that the dedication is to "W.S." At this point, he is quite aged—well into his sixties—and is surprised she can still excite his passions. His advanced age also means that he is approaching the age for retirement at the university. Lomax, still vindictive after all these years, is insistent that he retire immediately, but initially—perhaps as much to spite Lomax as anything—he refuses. As time progresses, however, he notices a pain developing in his lower body and the doctor informs that it is tumor. This news is finally enough to convince him to retire from the department and, after attending a dinner held in his honor, he has the tumor removed The cancer has spread too far, though, and he knows he will die.

In Chapter XVII, Stoner spends the last days of his life in a bed made in his study, the sun room. During this time an unfamiliar tenderness and affection develops between him and Edith, and she gives him constant attention to make him as comfortable as possible. Gradually his lucidity fades and his awareness of the passage of time, those around him, and even his own action diminishes sharply. He picks up a copy of his book from a nearby table, admires it briefly, and dies.

Chapters XV, XVI, and XVII Analysis

It is curious to contrast the disinterested detachment Stoner felt towards World War I as a young man with the burdened despair World War II seems to inspire in him. It seems almost to be a direct result of his age; he is, after all, about the same age Archer Sloane was when World War I was waged, and it had a similarly devastating effect upon him. One possible explanation is that Stoner feels more keenly the loss of his work—the death of men he has educated or in some way influenced intellectually and the general regression away from civilization and back to barbarism—since he has been doing it for so long. As a young man, Stoner was merely training to build up the intellectual achievements Sloane gloomily watched collapse; now he stands on the other end, so old that his gaze is now on his past rather than his future.

The final chapter is an example of the effective use of writing style to create a particular image. Reading through Stoner's final days, nothing seems clear or connected. Quotations come with little or no context. Images appear randomly and what is really happening around Stoner fades seamlessly into his recollections. The reader's experience is supposed to mirror Stoner's as he gradually loses his lucidity and connection with the world.

Characters

William Stoner

William Stoner is born into a Booneville farming family in 1891. In his early life, the farm life is all that he knows and he never travels outside of his immediate surroundings. At the suggestion of a county official, Stoner goes to the University of Missouri at the age of twenty, hoping to learn ways to make the decreasingly productive soil more fruitful. While there, he falls in love with English literature and, without his parents' knowledge, changes his course of studies. As his studies come to an end, he does not know what he wants to do with his degree; his teacher and the director of English literature, Archer Sloane, suggests he stays on to study English literature at the graduate level and earn his doctorate to become a teacher. Stoner accepts.

During his graduate years, Stoner makes two friends, Gordon Finch and David Masters; later, he says that they were his only two friends in his entire life. Both of them go to war after America enters into World War II and try to convince Stoner to come along, but after consulting with Archer Sloane, who says that war destroys the things intellectuals create, he decides not to enlist. He meets Edith Bostwick at a party thrown for returning veterans and is immediately drawn to her. They marry after a brief courtship, but from the start it is obvious that they will have difficulties. In part to distract himself from his troubled marriage, Stoner begins working on publishing a book and successfully does so. The only bright spot in Stoner's domestic life is their only child, Grace. In time, however, Edith manages to minimize the amount of time Stoner gets to see her.

As he ages, Stoner loses a lot of his inhibitions while teaching and learns to convey the passion he feels for his subject. His growingly eccentric ways and various struggles with department head Hollis Lomax turn him into a kind of living legend on campus. Once in his sixties, and nearing retirement age, he is reluctant to give up his career, and does so only when the doctor finds a cancerous tumor in his intestines. Though the tumor is removed, the cancer has spread too far, and he will die. His last moments are spent in an almost dream-like state as his mental faculties gradually fail him. With the last of his powers, he picks up his only published book, admires it briefly, then dies.

Edith Bostwick

Edith Bostwick is the child of a wealthy family in St. Louis. Her father, a banker, is ruined by the Great Depression and winds up committing suicide. Edith is shy by nature and there is reason to think that she was the victim of sexual abuse as a child. She finds the act of sex disgusting and will hardly allow her husband to touch her, and after they first have sex she looks on Stoner with disgust. When her father dies, she returns home for the funeral and destroys everything he gave her, as if destroying her memory of him. She returns to Columbia with a new desire to make life miserable for Stoner, projecting her hatred of her father, perhaps, on him.

As she ages, though she lives longer than Stoner, her mental faculties start to decay much earlier. He finds her talking to herself like a child in her studio and she begins to idly talk to other people only in the third person. During Stoner's last few days alive, they are finally able to have a kind of peace and even affection between them, as both realize with regret the way they have made life unhappy for the other.

Mr. Stoner

Stoner's father is a simple farmer. When William tells him that he wants to stay in school to study literature, he cannot understand his decision, but supports him nonetheless. He works hard in his fields even into his old age and is eventually found dead, face-down in the dirt.

Archer Sloane

Archer Sloane is the literature teacher who inspires Stoner to pursue English Literature in college. Stoner is required to take his class—an introduction to English Literature—as part of his general education requirements. He has difficulty understanding the material, and Sloane even makes a bit of a spectacle out of him, but nonetheless Stoner is drawn to it. The First World War takes a great toll on Sloane, who sees it as destroying what intellectuals have created—both by killing the minds they have educated and by regressing the civilization they have helped build back towards barbarism. He is found dead one day in his office of a heart attack.

David Masters

David Masters is one of Stoner's fellow graduate students in English Literature. Stoner admires his great intellect and is even fond of his bitter, cynical outlook on life. When America enters World War I, Masters enlists, not out of a sense of patriotism, but rather a desire for adventure. He dies in combat.

Gordon Finch

Gordon Finch is a fellow graduate student with Stoner. Like Masters, he enlists to fight in World War I but makes it home alive. He is not a greatly intelligent man, and his decision to study English Literature is motivated more by practical convenience than a true interest. He winds up holding various administrative jobs at the University of Missouri and remains Stoner's lifelong friend.

Grace Stoner

Grace Stoner is Stoner's daughter. When she is born, Edith wants nothing to do with her, and nearly all of the parental duties fall on Stoner. He finds great joy in her and the

two spend a great deal of time together until Edith decides to take her away from him and from that point on he is hardly able to see her. Though shy and overweight as a young teenager, Grace blossoms into an attractive young woman in high school and enjoys quite a bit of popularity. She becomes pregnant in college and winds up moving to St. Louis. Before her child is born, her husband dies in World War II and she winds up giving the child to her dead husband's parents to raise. Living alone on her husband's military pension she develops a severe drinking problem.

Hollis Lomax

Hollis Lomax is a professor at the University who suffers from an unfortunate deformity. Though initially Lomax and Stoner get along very well, they have a falling out over a graduate student, Charles Walker. Lomax believes Stoner's treatment of Walker was based on Walker's deformity and holds a grudge against him until Stoner's death. When Stoner passes up on taking over the department, Lomax becomes the director of the department and uses his power to make Stoner's life as miserable as possible.

Charles Walker

Charles Walker is a graduate student in the literature department who suffers from a deformity which makes him crippled. At Lomax's recommendation, he joins one of Stoner's seminars and it is immediately obvious that he does not understand the material and has no motivation to study. He winds up failing the class after giving an impromptu critique of Katherine Driscoll's presentation instead of reciting a well-researched paper like he was assigned. Sitting on the committee to determine whether or not Walker should continue on with the department, Stoner tries to get him kicked out, seeing Walker as the type of person who threatens to ruin academia. Lomax uses his political power to keep Walker in the program and holds a grudge against Stoner thereafter.

Katherine Driscoll

Katherine Driscoll is an instructor at the university. Stoner first meets her when she audits his seminar. He is impressed by her presentation—a presentation she was not required to give as a mere auditor. He promises to read her dissertation and begins to fall in love with her after he sees how brilliant she is. On the pretext of helping her develop her ideas, he spends a considerable amount of time with her at her apartment. They wind up having an adulterous affair which both find very fulfilling, physically and intellectually. Their affair is cut short when Lomax hears of it and plans to use it to ruin Stoner.

Ed Frye

Ed Frye is a student at the University of Missouri who fathers the child of Grace Stoner. Grace has only casual feelings for him, and they marry only because Edith insists on it. Before the child is born, Ed enlists in the military and dies in World War II. Grace later supposes that he enlisted to escape his marriage.

Objects/Places

Columbia, Missouri

Columbia is the city the University of Missouri is located in.

University of Missouri

The University of Missouri is where Stoner receives his education from his bachelor's degree to doctorate. He receives a post teaching there due to a shortage during World War I—the school's normal policy is not to hire its own graduates—and spends his entire life, up until his last few weeks of life, teaching there.

St. Louis

St. Louis is the closest major town near Columbia. Edith's family is from St. Louis and they spend a few days there for their honeymoon.

Booneville

Booneville is the small town where Stoner was born and where his parents remained until their death.

The Stoner Farm

Stoner grows up as a farm boy and his family's farm is basically all he knows. When his father dies—while working the fields—Stoner tries to convince his mom to leave and come live with him but she refuses. He realizes that she just wants to die where she had lived almost all of her life.

Stoner's Study

When Stoner and Edith buy a house, using a loan from Edith's parents, Stoner busies himself making a study in the basement. He realizes while he is building it that the process is symbolic of making himself into the kind of person he wants to be. The study is symbolic of his intellectual life, a kind of refuge from the worries of the world. Thus, when Edith one day moves everything out of it to make an art studio for herself, she is invading the most personal aspect of his life.

World War I

World War I begins with the assassination of the Archduke of Austria. America is later drawn into it by the sinking of the Lusitania, a British ship carrying over a hundred Americans. Finch and Masters both enlist in the military to fight, but Stoner decides to stay home. The war takes a heavy toll on Archer Sloane, who sees it as erasing the civilization that intellectuals like himself have helped to create.

World War II

World War II breaks out when Stoner is in his fifties and his reaction to it is similar to Sloane's reaction to World War I: gloom and sadness over the great losses. The period after World War II, however, are some of the happiest years of Stoner's life, as the university is teeming with new students just returned from war.

The Idea of the University

The idea of the university in general, and its role in society, is very important both to Stoner and the novel as a whole. Masters' theory is that the university is a kind of asylum, taking care of people who are too useless to survive in the real world; or, in his case, the university is a prison to keep people whose intellect threatens society. Stoner, however, gradually comes to agree with the view implicit in Sloane's words and actions: The university is a vital organ of society, which helps to civilize and enlighten it.

English Literature

English literature, particularly Medieval literature, is Stoner's field of interest and greatest passion in life.

Themes

The Role of the Intellect in Individual and Social Flourishi

The main theme throughout this book is the role of the intellect in the happiness of an individual and, by analogy, the vital role the university plays in a healthy society. Throughout Stoner's life, his only constant, stable source of happiness is his intellectual life. He is a shy person and has few friends (before he dies he considers that he really has only ever had two friends in his entire life), his marriage is unhappy from the start, his daughter is taken away by his scheming wife, and the only woman he ever really loved, Katherine Driscoll, is forced to leave Columbia when Lomax threatens to ruin both of them. Yet, despite all of this, and a few dark periods in his life, Stoner is a happy man, and he draws this happiness from studying literature and teaching it to others.

Just as his intellect is the key to Stoner's happiness, Williams is trying to prove a larger point: The university is the key to a society's happiness. The university is responsible for the development and promotion of ideas in society. It civilizes society and turns men away from the basic instincts to the higher life of the mind (symbolized, perhaps, by Stoner's transition from a farmer to a professor). It is for this reason that Sloane watches World War I with such gloom: The victory of barbarism—war—means the defeat of civilization. It is like a painter watching a gallery burn down with all of his art inside. Later in his life, Stoner will experience this sense of loss too as he looks upon the death and destruction of World War II.

Rejection of Conventional Sexual Morality

Though not the central theme of the book, Williams is clearly trying to make a statement against sexual conventions in his depiction of Katherine and Stoner's affair. Their story itself seems to follow a familiar pattern in literature: Two people who cannot be together fall in love and have a passionate relationship which ultimately cannot be. The difference, however, is that, conventionally, the reason that the two cannot stay together is because the morality of the situation, so to speak, catches up with them; the married man realizes he is hurting his wife or children, for example. There is no such moralizing in this case: The only reason that they have to stop their relationship is because Lomax vindictively threatens to ruin their careers.

In fact, far from hurting Stoner's sad domestic life, it actually makes things better. His wife knows, but does not care. On Stoner's end, he now has a sexual outlet which surely relieves some of the tension between him and Edith. Symbolically, perhaps this can be interpreted to mean that the mere fact that some ignore sexual mores is no threat to those who wish to keep them.

Stoner and Katherine also explicitly take pleasure in proving wrong the traditional belief that sexual purity is a necessity for a vibrant intellectual life. Far from being a distraction, their affair is as much intellectual as it is physical, and their mutual interest in literature is largely the basis for their happiness. This fusion of mind and body is captured by the way they spend their time together, alternating between bouts of study and bouts of sex.

The Use of Modern Psychology in the Development of Character

Williams, an academic writer in the 1960s, was surely aware of the advances being made in the science of psychology at the time. This knowledge seems to inform how he develops the character of Edith Stoner. Even a layman can recognize many of the signs of sexual abuse in her. She is ashamed of sex and disgusted by her own body and after they consummate their marriage, she transitions from being affectionate and happy with him to being disgusted by him. She looks on him almost like someone who has violated her. The only time they are able to have any kind of sexual passion between them is for a two month period when she decides she wants a child. When Grace is born, she seems to regret it immediately and barely wants to see the child at all.

Edith is naturally shy among men and a reasonable explanation for this is that she projects her fear and hatred of her father, who probably molested her as a child, onto all the men in her life, especially Stoner. After her father commits suicide, she decides to start a new chapter in her life. She destroys everything he gave to her as a child and makes a new look for herself. She returns to Columbia with a renewed desire to make life difficult for Stoner. She uproots his study, his one place of peace in an otherwise unhappy home. Grace, who had spent most of her time so far with Stoner, is taken away from him, perhaps in a misguided effort to protect her from a man, who in her mind would certainly hurt her.

Style

Point of View

The book is written from the third-person, but the information available to the narrator is generally limited to what Stoner is aware of. However, by using the third person, William is able to intentionally obscure a lot of Stoner's thoughts from the readers. For example, when Stoner makes the decision to stop studying agriculture in favor of English, the reader is unaware, perhaps shocked, since Stoner's only real experience with English literature seems to have been negative. While Stoner himself was ignorant of his reasons, there were surely some confused notions floating around in his mind about what he wanted to do, but by denying the reader access to those, Williams is able to more clearly show Stoner's ignorance of his own actions. It is only when Stoner consults Sloane that he fully understands why he is doing what he is doing.

The third-person also allows the book to be written a bit like a biography, putting Stoner into the role of an important historical figure. Of course, by intent, Stoner is anything but; he is a quite forgettable professor who is, in fact, largely forgotten after his death. Williams is trying to show, though, that this forgettable man, despite his sometimes turbulent professional and private lives, was able to achieve a certain level of greatness through his knowledge and teaching. The third-person also allows Williams to access on a few exceptional occasions information Stoner could not have had access to but which is, nonetheless, relevant to his story, like the fact that he was honored with a Medieval manuscript after his death or what exactly Edith did while she was home.

Setting

Almost the entire novel takes place in Columbia, Missouri and the narrative never leaves the state of Missouri. Columbia is the city where the University of Missouri is and, thus, where Stoner lives basically from the time he is twenty to his death. The University is a kind of intellectual home to him, and when he finishes his doctoral degree, thinking that he must leave because the school has a policy of not hiring its own graduates as faculty, he hesitantly applies to a few nearby schools, dreading the prospect of going elsewhere. He is naturally quite relieved when Sloane offers him a job because the school's policy has become impractical since the war has cut so severely into the job market.

Why Stoner has such an attachment to the University of Missouri is not totally clear; after all, students of other universities frequently leave them to take jobs elsewhere. It is possible that his attachment spawns from seeing it not only as the place where his intellectual life grew and developed significantly, but because he sees it as the place that gave birth to it. After all, when he lived on the farm for the first twenty years of his life, he did not have the leisure to spend much time in thought, nor did he have much to stimulate him to do so. Only after taking Sloane's class, where his intellect is challenged

(momentarily, beyond its abilities) does he start to develop into the kind of intellectual man he eventually becomes.

It is also worth noting how the University becomes a kind of last refuge from Stoner's domestic problems. Edith is not once seen on campus (with the possible exception of their first meeting, but it was really in a nearby house) and when Edith's grip on the household becomes absolute and he finds it impossible to study there, he escapes to his office on campus.

Language and Meaning

Williams' writing style is very simple and clear and he generally tries to make it recede behind the story he is trying to tell. His sentence construction, accordingly, is generally simple, though he does on some occasion use sentence constructions involving colons and semicolons. In the first few chapters, during which time Stoner is still a shy young man, there is little dialogue, which is a reflection, perhaps, of Stoner's own life. As Stoner matures and becomes more confident (or perhaps simply cares less about others' opinions) dialogue comes more and more to the front of the narration. Dialogue is often more verbose than Williams' narration, and one effect of this is to highlight the scholarly value of many of the characters involved in the story, like Stoner or Lomax or even the pretended intelligence of Charles Walker.

The final chapter is written in a style which mirrors the dream-like state of the dying Stoner. Quotations are frequently given without context and images of Stoner's past blend almost seamlessly with the events which are happening around him. The reader, then, shares in the confused, but somehow peaceful, last moments of Stoner's life.

Structure

The novel is divided into seventeen chapters. Aside from the beginning of the first chapter—which gives a general overview of Stoner's entire life—the book proceeds chronologically from his birth in the first chapter to his death in the final chapter. The bulk of Chapter I and Chapter II are dedicated to the years when he is receiving his education. Chapter I recounts his life on the farm before heading to the university and his undergraduate years at the University of Missouri, during which time he makes the decision to study English instead of agriculture. Chapter II discusses his years as a graduate student where he meets Finch and Masters. It is also during this time that America enters World War I and Finch and Masters leave to fight.

In Chapter III, Stoner meets Edith at a party held for the returning veterans and their courtship culminates in his proposal of marriage. He visits her family and her parents, somewhat to his surprise, give their blessing. In Chapter IV, Stoner and Edith are married and go on their honeymoon. Chapter V develops the problems in their marriage already foreshadowed in the previous chapter. In Chapter VI, Sloane dies and Lomax comes to the department and makes an initially favorable impression on Stoner. In chapter VII, Stoner's father and mother both die and Edith later finds out her father has

committed suicide. While at home for his funeral she decides to change the way she lives. In chapter VIII, now returned a new woman, Edith makes it a point to make life difficult for Stoner.

Chapter IX marks the beginning of the Charles Walker incident, as Stoner puts up with his distractions in his seminar and winds up failing him for dishonesty. In Chapter X Stoner tries to get Walker kicked out of the program despite Lomax's protests. In Chapter XI, Lomax, now department director, uses his political power to punish Stoner for his treatment of Walker. Now without the intellectual stimulation of higher level classes, Stoner falls into a kind of depression until he meets Katherine Driscoll and the two begin their affair together in Chapter XII. The affair continues into Chapter XIII but is ultimately ended by the threats of Lomax.

The final four chapters proceed at a much faster pace than the rest of the book and cover the last twenty or so years of his life rapidly. In Chapter XIV Stoner begins to age rapidly as he goes through both a severe bout with the flu and the Second World War takes a great emotional toll on him. Chapter XV overviews the next decade of his life as he develops a reputation around campus for his eccentricities. In Chapter XVI, now in his sixties, Stoner is resisting pressure from the still bitter Lomax to retire, but finally concedes when the doctor finds a tumor in his intestines. Chapter XVII records his last days alive as he considers the history, failures, and accomplishments of his life before dying.

Quotes

"It was a lonely household, of which he was an only child, and it was bound together by the necessity of its toil." (4)

"'But don't you know, Mr. Stoner?' Sloane asked. 'Don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher.'" (20)

"'The scholar should not be asked to destroy what he has aimed his life to build.'" (36)

"She continued to talk, and after a while he began to hear what she was saying. Years later it was to occur to him that in that hour and a half on that December evening of their first extended time together, she told him more about herself than she ever told him again. And when it was over, he felt that they were strangers in a way that he had not thought they would be, and he knew that he was in love." (53)

"And like other new husbands of whom he had heard and at whose expense he had at one time or another made jokes, he spent his wedding night apart from his wife, his long body curled stiffly and sleeplessly on a small sofa, his eyes open to the passing night." (68)

". . . but in the way that was finally most important the two men [Lomax and Stoner] were alike, though neither of them might wish to admit to the other, or even to himself." (98)

"And at that moment, somehow, he also knew that beyond her intention or understanding, unknown to herself, Edith was trying to announce to him a new declaration of war." (115)

"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, and the dispossessed, the crippled. But he didn't mean Walker. Dave would have thought of Walker—as the world. And we can't let him in. For if we do, we become like the world, just as unreal, just as . . . The only hope we have is to keep him out.'" (167)

"In his forty-third year William Stoner learned what others, much younger, had learned before him: that the person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last, and that love is not an end but a process through which one person attempts to know another." (194)

"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 really having 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;

and since the embodiment came before the recognition of the truth, it seemed a discovery that belonged to them alone." (199)

"In the summer of 1937 he felt a renewal of the old passion for study and learning; and with the curious and disembodied vigor of the scholar that is the condition of neither youth nor age, he returned to the only life that had not betrayed him. He discovered that he had not gone far from that life even in his despair." (221)

"He had known that his mind must weaken as his body wasted, but he had been unprepared for the suddenness. The flesh is strong, he thought; stronger than we imagine. It wants always to go on." (275)

Topics for Discussion

Why does the author begin the book by summarizing Stoner's life?

Why does Stoner decide to change his major to English after being embarrassed by Sloane?

What motivates Edith's attitude towards Stoner? Why does it suddenly change after they have sex?

What does Sloane think is being destroyed by war?

What ultimately convinces Stoner not to fight in World War I?

Why is Grace so submissive to Edith's will?

Why is Lomax so defensive of Walker?