Faculteit Letteren & Wijsbegeerte

Thomas Lezy

How Existentialism Affects Generic Tradition in the Fiction of John Williams

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2 General Introduction

John Edward Williams published four novels under his name but later cut all ties with his debut. For each of the three novels that remained, he adopted a different genre. His debut can be called a western, its successor an academic novel and a third one in the epistolary genre. After reading Williams' novels, it becomes apparent that each novel in its specific genre, strays from generic norms. This innovativeness is an effect caused by the presence of an overarching philosophical theme which influences the course of the story. The protagonists are men who are coming of age, going through mid-life experiences or reflect on their lives as men of old age. They are troubled minds looking for a meaning to life or validation of the life they are living. The plot in all three of the novels seems to be heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy and it is exactly this effect that this philosophical theme causes that will be discussed in the thesis.

In each chapter I will discuss the genre of each novel and highlight how Williams' attributions are part of, but definitely stand out as well against the generic tradition. With this I mean that his novels tend to ignore those aspects of the specific genre that are not suitable to cohere with the overarching existentialist theme. I will also point out how the existentialist theory affects the storyline and the overall plot of the novels. The third chapter will stand out because it is much shorter than the previous two. The third novel, *Augustus*, was written in the epistolary genre. A novel built out of letters has little thematic or plot limitations as long as the form of its content is presented as a correspondence. In this chapter I mainly discuss the influence of existentialism and not the generic innovativeness this entailed in the earlier novels. The final chapter will be dedicated to some informed speculation as to what caused this sudden spike in Williams' popularity. The first novel that will be discussed is *Butcher's Crossing*, a western.

3 Butcher's Crossing

3.1 Introduction

Williams' first novel, *Butcher's Crossing,* was published in 1960 and, against his own will, immediately labeled a western. The novel is clearly written in the western genre but highlights certain characteristics of the tradition that so far had remained largely untouched by other authors: nature becomes a threat, killing becomes cruel and it is man who becomes the through beast that roams the plains. *Butcher's Crossing* seems to actively shun certain aspects of the western genre tradition and indicates this in the work as well, while on the other hand embracing and even foregrounding other characteristics while in most novels they all seem to work together. *Butcher's Crossing* is a disruptive novel, awaking you from the naivety that had surrounded the American west in literature for decades. This disruptive quality is caused by an existentialist theme that runs through the entirety of the story and is actually makes up the main plot of the novel. Williams clearly had great knowledge of literary and generic tradition but still felt that this could not dominate the running of the story. This existentialist undertone causes the story to take a path that has remained untouched before and provides a most unsettling feeling at the end. In this chapter I will provide a small section on the history and tradition of the western after which I will point out which aspects of the genre were embraced and which were cast aside in the novel. Afterwards I will describe the existentialist undertone that is present and link it to existentialist theory, more specific that of Soren Kierkegaard. I will attempt to point out how this theme of existentialism heavily influenced the story to the extent that it supersedes any generic classification and stands out against its forerunners.

3.2 Plot Summary

Set in the mid 1800s on the plains of Kansas, William Andrews, a 23 year-old Harvard drop-out, travels west to a small town called Butcher's Crossing, in order to make sense of his life and discover some purpose in it. He first meets up with a trader named McDonald who sends out parties to hunt buffalo for their skin. McDonald questions the sense of Andrews' quest before he points him towards Miller, an experienced hunter who works independently. Miller talks about a giant herd of buffalo, which nobody knows about, in a remote valley on a mountain where few man have ever set foot. He manages to persuade Awards to finance the trip, and together with two other men, Charley Hodge (cook) and Fred Schneider (skinner), they create their own hunting party. After MacDonald agrees on buying any hides they bring back, not believing in the existence of the herd, the four men set out. After a perilous journey they find the herd, which is indeed huge, as Miller predicted, consisting of several thousands of buffalo. Unfortunately Miller's greed gets the best of him, and he neglects the changing seasons. The men remain in the valley for too long trying to kill every single buffalo. When winter is suddenly upon them, they get snowed in and are forced to spend several harsh months in the valley. They survive but when spring finally arrives and they are ready to leave, disaster strikes. Upon crossing a river, the cart with the hides and Schneider, riding his horse next to it, get hit by a floating log causing him to drown and their cargo to be swallowed by the wild water. They arrive back at Butcher's Crossing a man short and without anything to bring back to McDonald. Upon their arrival MacDonald informs them that in their absence the fur market has collapsed, making the death of their companion and the hardships they endured look even more pointless. Miller and Charley Hoge seem to lose their mind upon receiving this news while it makes Andrews realize that this life will not answer the questions he had which lead to him coming to Butcher's Crossing in the first

place. At the close of the novel we see Andrews resume his search for answers, but this time on his own.

3.3 The American Western Novel

In his review of the novel, Bret Easton Ellis writes that "*Butcher's Crossing* is resolutely a western. However, when his publisher expressed a desire to state as much on the cover due to the popularity of the genre at the time, Williams said no. It may be one of the more literary westerns I've read, but it is a western…" (Ellis). Williams' reaction to his publisher's request and this quote by Ellis indicate that not all western novels can be lumped together under the same heading. The key word, according to some, is "literary". Ellis touches upon this but this characteristic is emphasized by John Milton. In his book *The Novel of the American West,* "literary" is cited as the essential quality for creating a subdivision in literature dealing with the American west. Milton makes a distinction between westerns and Westerns (xiv). The capital "W" indicating the presence of a literary quality. Milton describes lower-case "w" westerns as 'the popular, commercial, or formula novel … a subliterary form designed to exploit the myths of the Old West, to reach a mass audience, and to provide entertainment through outdoor adventures involving heroes and villains" (xiv). He mentions another element of the American West, utilized by writers of such westerns to popularize their fiction, when he states that such novels are 'set in the West deliberately in order to exploit a romantic and adventurous situation which becomes a commodity for sale in the mass market" (2).

Opposite of this class of so called 'subliterary" novels, Milton places Westerns, with a capital "w". He asserts that 'the novel which is the main subject of the present study, and which I shall call the capital "W" Western novel, is literary. It is as well written and as significant as the nonwestern novel which is given extended treatment in most American literary histories…"

(xiv). According to Milton, this second type, the Western, "is sensitive to human behavior as well as to meaningful qualities of the land, is conscious of the relationship between the historical past and the present, is engaged in defining western man … and is concerned with several kinds of reality. Although the land itself is usually a powerful force in the Western novel, the realization of character remains a primary task…" (xv).

On the one hand we have these westerns, these novels describe everyday life on the plains, but these events are exaggerated, dramatized or spiced with action scenes for sale purposes. These stories are based on myths and legends of the American West and its earliest inhabitants: Native Americans, European settlers and cowboys, who serve as 19th century knights. Stereotypical imagery dictates the characterization of such characters. The novels could be labeled adventure stories, starring a morally cultivated hero in a lawless and at times seemingly amoral environment, placed opposite an identifiable evil which is a threat to himself and his inner circle. The land, the characters and the environmental peculiarities serve as some sort of escape fantasy for the reader. The Western on the other hand, focuses more on the individual man travelling across the plains in search of the undefinable about himself. These novels serves as a study of the protagonist's psychology as he undertakes this quest. The American west is no longer an adventurous place, but turns into a retrospective mirror. Andrews wants to uncover the aspects and qualities that define his own personality, hoping that these will add meaning and a sense of direction to his life. The seemingly boundless territory enforce the feeling of complete physical and mental isolation and allows for an introvert reflection on one's existence.

Milton's division is a subjective one, based on what he believes is quality literature. But although Milton's standard for comparison might be discussable, I cannot disagree with Milton's

desire to create a subdivision in the literature dealing with the American west and the two classes he distinguishes portray essential differences. The amount of literature dealing with this geographical area is so extensive that labelling every single one of these stories as merely "Western" is not adequate enough to cover the diverse collection of stories. There is a noticeable difference between several kinds of western fiction. In 't*he Oxford History of the American West"* Thomas Lyon reaches a similar conclusion but he is much more cautious in defining these classes. First of all he comes up with a very plausible explanation as to how this division came about. The interest in the American west never diminished so different takes on the subject were inevitable over time. Lyon mentions that in the American west 'the natives were more resistant than in some of Europe's other frontiers, the landscape was more sublime, and the advancing Anglo-Americans had had several generations of pioneering in which to build an identity as tough practitioners of expansion. What came out of this mix literarily was a durable pattern of romance and myth and a set of images that permeate the broader national culture" (708). Lyon, unlike Milton, bases his division on content characteristics, never diminishing the literary quality of both classes. Lyon uses "frontier" and "postfrontier" to label both his classes. "Frontier" fiction is Lyon's equivalent for Milton's western fiction and is described in the following matter:

> "The literature that uses the "frontier" set of myths and values unconsciously – that is, in effect, expansionist by faith, though perhaps tinged from time to time with a certain helpless regret, for example over the plight of the Indians or the loss of the wilderness – such literature has been enormously popular. It may answer some deep American needs … creating formulas of resolution for the contradictions inherent in a history of violence and aggrandizement." (Lyon, 708)

Lyon seems to show a lot more respect towards this literature than Milton, who said its main goal was to be popular on the market. This class of literature seems to consist of out fictitious reflective history writing, where writers try to come to terms with the past and attempt to resolve past conflicts through literature in order to come to a moral conclusion. Opposite of this “frontier” fiction, Lyon places the “postfrontier fiction” which he interprets as:

> Another western literature, one that should be called “postfrontier”, whose stance towards the frontier and the frontier ethos is conscious, reflective, and analytic. In general, this writing is not characterized by expansionist sentiments or romance but by a regardful perspective on the environment, a sympathetic view towards Indians, and a realistic bent in historical and social descriptions. A complex self-consciousness stands behind this more mature regional literature, (Lyon, 708).

Lyon concludes by giving us two additional, vaguer, terms to label both classes: “the western literary-critical divide, indeed, is between two literatures: popular and, if the term be allowed, serious” (708). Lyon thus uses the terms “popular” and “frontier” to describe Milton’s western fiction and ‘serious” and “postfrontier” to label what Milton called Western fiction. Taking both theories into consideration, I will now take a look to which class “*Butcher’s Crossing”* belonged.

3.4 *Butcher’s Crossing* as a “Frontier” Novel

Throughout the early stages of the novel, Williams takes his novel away from the popular fiction. He provides several textual passages in which he deliberately denies any influences from the popular, “frontier” western tradition. During the first meeting between Andrews and Miller, when they are discussing the specificities of their upcoming quest, the following conversation between both men ensues:

> "You shoot a gun?"
>
> "Do you mean a – pistol?"
>
> Miller smiled tightly. "No man in his right mind has any use for them little things," he said, "unless he wants to get killed. I mean a rifle." (Williams, 36)

Williams takes his novel away from the popular novel tradition. Important to note is that Williams takes care of all these influences in the first part of the novel, before the hunting party enters the valley. Before they enter this western sanctuary he wants to assure his readers that they are in for an unprecedented experience set in the American west. On their way there, the men stumble upon the following scene:

> Once, where the trail skirted close to the river, they came upon a wide bluff, from the side of which had been excavated a series of crude dugouts. On the flat hard earth in front of the dugouts several brown, naked children were playing; behind the children, near the openings of the dug-outs, squatted half a dozen Indians; the women where shapeless in the blankets they held about them despite the heat, and the men were old and wizened … Miller waved, but none of the Indians gave any sign of response. "River Indians," Miller said contemptuously. ' … They ain't worth shooting anymore." (Williams, 96)

The Indians here are not portrayed as the great prideful warriors but as a people that has already been defeated. "the men were old and wizened", their time has passed, literally but also figuratively in the literary realm. Something similar happens a bit later on in the novel. In his book, Milton noticed that "as the western rode into the late 1930s and the 1940s, it was accompanied by increasing doses of bullets and blood" (23). It seems as if Schneider and Miller address this issue in the novel:

> "Schneider moved suddenly, and whirled to Miller. 'I just thought,' he said. 'How much lead and powder you got in that wagon?'
>
> 'ton and a half, two tons,' Miller said, not looking at him.
>
> 'Well, my God,' Schneider said. 'No wonder them animals is dry. We could go twice as far if we'd dump that stuff.'
>
> 'No,' Miller said." (Williams, 113)

Here too, there is an extensive amount of bullets and gunpowder present but not a single bullet will be fired towards another human being. Once again, an aspect of the popular western literature is implemented in the novel but then its importance is diminished in relation to the overall story.

3.5 Butcher's Crossing as a "Postfrontier" Novel

Expanding on the earlier definition Milton further described the class of Western novels as being "engaged in defining the western man" (xv), and that 'the realization of character remains a primary task" (xv). Lyon points out that this class of novels, which he called "postfrontier", displays "a regardful perspective on the environment" and that the characters, or at least the main character, deal with "a complex self-consciousness" (708). I will first focus on the role of the environment to which, in *Butcher's Crossing,* there is much more than just a regardful perspective.

The theme of Nature encases the novel. Nature plays such a prominent part in the novel that it could almost be seen as a character, carrying agency. Substantial parts of the novel deal with the men having to withstand its force. To showcase this strength, Williams creates a protagonist who is accustomed to the city life, where the environment is tightly controlled and

the uncontrollable and undesired aspects of nature are kept at bay. William Andrews belongs to the “Boston Brahmins,” the upper class in 19th-century Boston. His father was a Unitarian lay minister who owned his own church, and Andrews himself was attending Harvard before he left. A clear discrepancy arises between the protagonist natural environment and the one he travels to and it is this discrepancy which enables Williams to portray nature as the tangible force it is in the novel. The American west is a new environment to Andrews, one on which he has little or no grasp at all. The naturalistic force present there is so different than the one he was accustomed to that it feels as if someone or something is messing with him mentally. In his book, Milton writes about Francis Parkman, a Bostonian who wrote about his first experiences in the west. Milton notes that “Parkman’s Boston Brahmin background kept him from putting his experiences into really significant terms: he could not find the language he needed to confront and convey the extent, solitude, and wildness of the West.” (75). Something similar happens in Williams’s novel, but here the confusion is brought about purposefully to portray the alienation Andrews feels when he enters the Great Plains.

> “Another strangeness was waiting for him when they left the trail and went into the Colorado Territory. His half-closed eyes nearly recaptured, when he was at home in Boston; but the thin black lines wavered upon the real grass before him, took on color and then faded. He could not recapture the strange sensations he had had, long ago, when he first saw those depictions of the land he now was seeking.” (Williams, 80).

Andrews experiences something unprecedented when faced with such a vast area, unspoiled by the touch of humans, ruled by the laws of nature. Just like Mr. Parkman, Andrews registers confusion. He had read about these areas and had created certain mental images about it, based

upon written accounts. These images clash with what he experiences firsthand. The highly civilized standard in the city makes him long for the freedom that comes with a life in nature. Andrews idealized the west, believing it would evoke a sense of freedom and individuality which the city could not provide.

The importance and impact of nature on the story is highly noticeable. Williams' description of natural topography and events is richly detailed which highlights his tendency to resort to literary realism. *Butcher's Crossing* compares the unmeasurable force of nature to the vanity of mankind and denies our unjustified belief in some kind superior state. The following excerpt will clarify my statement.

> "Miller frowned, and blinked. "What's wrong?"
>
> "I don't know," Schneider said. "But something is. Something don't feel right to me."…
>
> The three men sat in their saddles, quiet, listening for something they did not know. The wind had died, but a slight chill remained in the air…
>
> Out of the air, large and soft and slow, like a falling feather, drifted a single snowflake. As he watched he saw another, and another.
>
> "Why, it's snowing," he [Andrews] said, laughing, looking again from one of them to the other…
>
> His voice died in his throat. Neither Miller nor Schneider looked at him, and neither gave any sign that they knew he had spoken. Their faces were tense and strained at the thickening sky from which the snow was falling more and more rapidly … Charley Hoge's face was raised upward, and his arms were clasped

> together over his chest; his eyes rolled wildly, but he did not move his head or unclasp his arms…
>
> "You said it would be all right." His voice gained strength, became accusing: "You said we'd make it out before the snow came."
>
> "It's all right, Charley," Miller said. "We got plenty of time."
>
> Charley Hoge's voice rose: "I said I didn't want to come. I told you –" (Williams, 197-99)

The fear of the men becomes palpable when placed opposite against Andrews' ignorance. He is oblivious to the consequences snow causes. Ironically they only have themselves to blame for their predicament. They stayed in the valley for too long, wanting to kill all to buffalo, not only for the money, but also to brag to their peers about what they accomplished in times when it was hard to still find a large herd with a good quality hide. Miller expresses this. Miller threw a rope over the top of the bales. "We'll steady her as we go down,' he said. 'And if we take it careful, the axles will hold up.' He paused for a moment. 'I want us to go back into Butcher's Crossing with a real load. And watch their eyes bug out." (Williams, 249). In their greed they abandoned logic and for that, they seem to get punished. Nature is a punishing force on many occasions, which Ellis mentions as a characteristic of the postfrontier Western when he discusses the potential for, but denial of romance in *Butcher's Crossing*: "It is Miller's narrative the men are entering – he is Ahab – and an already revisionist western becomes an increasingly unromantic and harrowing book about the futility of trying to control nature" (Ellis). None of the dramatic natural events are rare phenomena. They are common and not that significant in general but made so in the novel to illustrate the futility mentioned by Ellis. Next to the aforementioned first

snow, we have the stress and general feeling of hopelessness the men experience at the start of their adventure, brought about by the scarceness of water and the overall dryness of the land.

> "As far as he could see, the land was flat and without identity. The blades of grass that stood up stiffly a few inches from his nose blurred and merged into the distance, and the distance came upon him with a rush. He closed his eyes upon what he saw, and his vague fingertips pushed at the grass until they parted it, and he could feel the dry powdery earth upon his fingertips. He pressed his body against the ground, and did not look at anything, until the terror that had crept upon him from his dizzying view of the prairie passed, as if through his fingertips, back into the earth whence it had come." (Williams, 108)

There is also the small river that grows to a boiling mass of water because of the melting snow, which eventually causes Schneider to drown.

> "In the early fall, when they had crossed it last, the river had been a thin trickle that barely covered the bed of rock; now it stretched from bank to bank and cut away the earth opposite where they rested. Andrews looked up and down the river; on either side of him, the narrowest part stretched to at least a hundred yards." (Williams, 257)

Williams does not add dramatize his descriptions of nature but through them we are still made aware of the gravity of the situation the men find themselves in. Williams's descriptions lean close to literary journalism. In his interpretation of the literary West, Lyon discusses what changes were made story wise, in postfrontier fiction: "…cowboys are working men rather than knights; and the western landscape, though still very much able to arouse a transcendental response, tends to be treated in a less impressionistic and sentimental fashion. All of these

improvements in realism are incorporated, in fiction, in the vehicle and test of characterization" (721).

There is another kind of nature that is thoroughly touched upon in Williams' Western novel. This novel is more about the characters and how they experience what happens to them than about the actual events. Next to the surrounding nature, Williams attempts to portray human beings their internal uncivil nature or wildness. It is also what Andrews' attempts to discover in himself: "But whatever he spoke he knew would be but another name for the wildness that he sought" (John Williams, 18). The presence and potential disrupting quality of this intrinsic wildness becomes most visible in the characters of Miller and Charley Hodge. Charley, a devout catholic, believes his religion will work as a shield against the forces of nature. Since God created nature, according to Christianity, Charley believes that God will make sure nature does inflict pain and misery upon him. He sees it as something to hold on to in the chaos that surrounds him. When he becomes aware that his faith cannot provide physical protection he becomes mad. His most precious possession on the trip is his bible, the material connection to his faith. When they are surprised by the sudden snow Andrews notices Hoge behavior. "Andrews shouted again: "It'll be all right Charley. It'll be all right." He was barely able to hear what Charley Hoge repeated over and over, to the wind, the snow and the cold: "God help me. Lord Jesus Christ help me. God help me." (John Williams, 203). Right before the great tragedy when their wagon is hit by the log and tips over, Miller informs with Charley if he is okay driving the wagon across. Charley's reply is the following: "Sure,' Charley Hoge said. He reached into his shirt and pulled out the warped and stained Bible. 'The Lord will provide. He'll turn my steps in the right path." (Williams, 261). But tragedy strikes in the form of a giant

log which causes Schneider to drown. Charley tries to find an explanation for this, once again by referring to religion.

> "He was a blasphemer,' Charley Hoge's voice cracked high and thin … his eyes blinked rapidly, and the muscles of his face twitched uncontrolled, as if his face were falling apart. 'He was a blasphemer,' Charley Hoge said again, and nodded rapidly … 'He lay with scarlet women and he fornicated and he blasphemed and he took the name of the Lord in vain.' He opened his eyes and turned his unseeing face toward Andrews. 'It's God's will. God's will be done." (Williams, 266)

Charley places all his trust in God, but he is not a true Christian. He relies on God in perilous situations and when it could aid his own purpose. He is superficially religious, maybe even experiencing religion as an obligation. Charley survives everything though, maintaining a strong belief in his religion. But his survival comes at a certain cost. Their extensive stay in the valley and the death of Schneider have caused a mental breakdown in Charley. Which becomes obvious in the novel's final pages.

> "Don't you remember Charley?" Andrews's voice was hollow. "Don't you remember anything about it?"
>
> "Remember?" Charley Hoge asked.
>
> "The mountains – the hunt – Schneider –"
>
> "That's his name," Charley Hoge said. Schneider. That's the skinner in Ellsworth that Miller's going to get."
>
> "Don't you remember?" Andrews's voice cracked. "Schneider's dead."

> Charley Hoge looked at Andrews, shook his head, and smiled; a drop of spittle gathered on his lower lip, swelled, and coursed into the gray stubble around his chin. “Nobody dies,” he said softly. “The Lord will provide.” (Williams, 308)

He could not come to terms with the situation he was in, unwilling to take any action while irrationally accepting any dogmatic truth in order to find comfort and confirmation that his destiny is not in his own hands. His inability to face the perilous situations he got involved in combined with the apparent dysfunctionality of his prayers and pleas to an imaginary divine creature drives Charley crazy. The area he entered with the other men is void of any spiritual divinity with nature as the only force to take into account. Charley’s unwillingness to accept this and to look further than what he was taught in the civilized world renders it unable for him to make any sense of anything that happened to them on their trip. His religious belief turns into blind fear and awe for the divine.

The wildness that takes hold of Charley comes in the form of surrender to religion and a complete loss of rational thinking. There is another, more clear, example in the novel of a man returning to his wild, bestial status; the case of Miller. When Miller arrives in Butcher’s Crossing empty handed he visits McDonald, the man who promised to buy their hides. He informs MacDonald about the bales of hides that are still in the valley because the wagon was too small to carry them all at once. McDonald informs Miller that in their absence the fashion whims in Europe had changed and the buffalo skin was no longer something desirable. Miller is unwilling to accept this situation and accuses McDonald of playing a game. McDonald is completely innocent in this entire matter but Miller needs to vent his anger out on someone. After he leaves McDonald, Miller seems to go berserk and sets off on a rampage, burning the

compound of McDonald along with all the hides that were stocked there. Andrews describes the scene.

> "For a moment he was blinded by the intensity of the flame – blue and white and yellow-orange, cut through with streaks of black – and his eyes narrowed against the brilliance. Then, among the scattered bales of buffalo hides, high above which the flames turned massively, he saw a dark furious movement. It was Miller, on a horse which reared and screamed in terror at the flames, but which was held under control by the sheer force of Miller's strength. With furious jerks of the reins, which cut the bit deep into the horse's bleeding mouth, and with heavy strokes of his heel against its sides, Miller forced his horse to dart among the scattered bales … senselessly, Miller darted up to the very mouth of the flame, and then let his horse pull away, and darted close again." (Williams, 314)

In his rage, Miller even seems to have obtained super human strength.

> "A dark figure, shapeless in the outer edges of the firelight, he scuttled to one of the bales that lay on its side near the wagon. He stooped, and in the shadow became undistinguishable from the bale. He straightened, and the shapes became distinct, the bale moving upward as he straightened… For an instant, he swayed beneath the gigantic shape; then he lurched forward, and ran, halting abruptly at the side of the wagon, so that his burden toppled forward off his shoulders and crashed into the bed of the wagon…
>
> 'My God!" one of the townspeople behind Andrews said. 'Them bales must weigh three, four hundred pounds." (Williams, 316)

Miller is defined by his profession. Hunting buffalo is his existence. As he grew better at it, his reputation grew and his ego caused his downfall. Throughout the story readers get the idea that Miller is somehow above nature. He learned to master his surroundings in order to gain status. Andrews picks up on this and starts to question his decision to come west when he witnesses Miller slaughtering the herd.

> "During the last hour of the stand he [Andrews] came to see Miller as a mechanism, an automaton, moved by the moving herd; and he came to see Miller's destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood or a lust for the hides or a lust for what the hides should bring, or even at last the blind lust of fury that toiled darkly within him – he came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to the life in which Miller had immersed himself." (Williams, 158-59)

He never really panics when faced with a dangerous or troublesome situation. He calms the other men when their water supply is running low by guaranteeing them that he knows the location of a river close by, he comes up with the plan to wrap themselves in the buffalo hides as protection against the blizzard, he takes control of the actual hunt of the buffalo; Miller is able to predict the herd its behavior and adjust his strategy according to their reaction and he even manages to find food in the valley although the entire area is covered in snow. Furthermore, he never seems to be fazed by anything that happens and the environment seems to grow upon him as their trip progresses. Character descriptions of Miller display his altering behavior: "After the first day's journey, Miller spoke very little, as if hardly aware of the men who rode with him" (John Williams, 87). Even when they are snowed Miller remains seemingly unfazed by the outbursts of nature: "Miller was most at ease in his isolation" (John Williams, 234) and later on:

"He saw Miller rough and dark and shaggy against the whiteness of the snow: like a distant fir tree, he was distinct from the landscape, and yet an inevitable part of it" (John Williams, 237).

Miller seems closest in resembling a stereotypic western cowboy, but he has evolved into a more realistic, less morally ideal, character. In his book "*Virgin Land"* Henry Nash Smith writes about Hosea Ballou, a writer who produced an enormous number of lowercase, frontier, westerns that appeared in periodicals. He had to write so much, so fast that he had to take on a group of employee writers in order to be able to finish his work. This group developed a new kind of adventure story and subsequently a new kind of American western hero, namely the "Mountain Man" (Smith 87-88). This character was invented around 1850, and it is around that time that Williams's novel is set, in the second half of the 1840s. This hero is described in the following way: "the landscape within which this Western hero operates has become … 'a dreary waste.' It throws the hero back in upon himself and accentuates his terrible and sublime isolation. He is an anarchic and self-contained atom…alone in a hostile, or at best a neutral, universe" (Smith, 89). The idea grows that this man belongs in nature but at the end it is revealed that he only learned to master his surroundings in order to gain status in the civilized world as was shown in the extract in which Miller wants to see the "eyes bug out" of Butcher's Crossing's inhabitants upon their return. Once again Williams acknowledges the tradition but refuses to have it play any relevance to his story. He only adopts the character Miller to show that even these characters, who seem rooted in our literary memory as strong individuals, can experience a fall from grace and a mental breakdown. This confident, adventurous character aids Williams's attempt to display man's vanity and use of nature's reserves to obtain selfish and ego boosting goals. The novel highlights the superficiality of such ventures. Miller's and Charley's descent to this uncivilized, bestial status shows their dependence on the structures of

civilization. They need a structure they can benefit from to function and to strive in and when they lose this foothold they resort to naturalistic behavior, resembling animals establishing their authority in a new order.

The final part of the novel forms the apotheosis. The last fifty pages contain the death of Schneider and the mental deterioration of both Charley and Miller which will lead to Andrew reaching certain conclusions. At the end of the novel it becomes clear that the character development is the primary plot and the buffalo hunt serves primarily as an instigator which causes this behavioral change. Lyon mentions this as one of the overall characteristics of the postfrontier Western novel tradition. He writes that "generally speaking, the maturation of western fiction is marked by increasing subtlety and complexity of characterization and a diminishment in the weight of plot and ideology" (721). The novel mainly focusses on the evolution of Andrews. The mental instability showcased by his companions mainly serves to indicate the personality changes this causes within our protagonist. Through his fellow travelers he reaches certain conclusions about his own quest. In the following section I will discuss the existentialist undertone which may have affected the characterization process to a certain degree. I will link Williams' debut or at least his characters to the three phases in life according to Soren Kierkegaard and show how the novel reaches some kind of conclusion in relation to Kierkegaard's theory. The notion of subjectivity will be stressed extensively as this will eventually cause Andrews to obtain some valuable knowledge out of these hardships.

3.6 Existentialism in Butcher's Crossing

Williams prioritizes the development of character over the construction of a thrilling plot. As mentioned before this section will be dedicated to the discussion of the visible and invisible

aspects of 19 and 20th century philosophy in Williams's first novel. The fact that many of these influences remain unidentified in the novel aid in creating the mysterious atmosphere at the end, while actually a meaningful conclusion has been reached, a conclusion I will try to clarify through extensive reference to the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard.

The first reference to philosophy comes from Andrews himself and immediately highlights the relevance it will play in the novel. Before he came to Butcher's Crossing, Andrews attended the prestigious Harvard University. At Harvard, he was taught by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his entry on transcendentalism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Russell Goodman names Emerson as one of the leading figures in the transcendentalist movement. He defines the followers of this philosophical and religious movement as "critics of their contemporary society for its unthinking conformity, and urged that each person find, in Emerson's words, "an original relation to the universe" (Goodman). This basic definition summarizes the story told by Williams in *"Butcher's Crossing"*. Andrews feels alienated in society and while at Harvard, where one demands its students to obey rules and adapt a behavioral stance without questioning any of it, he feels the need to break from this conformity if he wants be able to define himself. The American west is a logical place if one needs to break with society. Emerson, too, stresses the importance of a naturalistic environment. In his publication *Nature*, Emerson attempts to define what it takes to achieve such an original and unique relation through the metaphor of the transparent eyeball. Emerson introduces this metaphor in the following way:

> "Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am

> part or particle of God…In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature." (Emerson, 511)

Absorbing nature is key to come to a relevant understanding of life according to Emerson. The following passage from *Butcher's Crossing* betrays Williams's familiarity with the material.

> "Sometimes after listening to the droning voices in the chapel and in this classrooms, he [Andrews] had fled the confines of Cambridge to the fields and woods that lay southwestward to it. There in some small solitude, standing on bare ground, he felt his head bathed by the clean air and uplifted into infinite space; the meanness and the constriction he had felt were dissipated in the wildness about him. A phrase from a lecture by Mr. Emerson that he had attended came to him: I become a transparent eyeball. Gathered in by field and wood, he was nothing; he saw all; the current of some nameless force circulated through him … Through the streets and across the rolling landscape, he had been able to see a hint of the distant horizon to the west; and there, for an instant, he had beheld somewhat as beautiful as his own undiscovered nature." (Williams, 48)

Andrews decides, based on Emerson's lectures, to venture out into the wild and discover his personal nature, his own identity that remains undiscovered to himself. But theory and practice are rarely the same and pretty early on in the novel Williams assures his readers that in this story, it will be no different.

> "As far as he could see, the land was flat and without identity. The blades of grass that stood up stiffly a few inches from his nose blurred and merged into the

> distance, and the distance came upon him with a rush. He closed his eyes upon what he saw, and his vague fingertips pushed at the grass until they parted it, and he could feel the dry powdery earth upon his fingertips. He pressed his body against the ground, and did not look at anything, until the terror that had crept upon him from his dizzying view of the prairie passed, as if through his fingertips, back into the earth whence it had come." (Williams, 108)

This excerpt, which I already touched upon when discussing the role of nature in the novel, illustrates the difficulty of Andrews's quest. He is completely new to such an environment and he feels much more alienated than he might have expected.

This feeling of alienation is implemented very deliberately. The passage above illustrates the difficulty of adopting a lifestyle based on a philosophical ideal. Williams implements the ideas of another philosophic tendency to contrast Emerson's transcendentalism. Williams creates a contrast between the transcendentalism of Emerson and the existentialism of Kierkegaard. To discuss the focus on existentialism in *Butcher's Crossing* I will refer to Mary Warnock's book *Existentialism*. On the very first page of the novel, Warnock writes "That the common interest which unites Existentialist philosophers is the interest in human freedom" (Warnock, 1). Furthermore she mentions that "for Existentialists, uniquely, the problem of freedom is in a sense a practical problem. They aim, above all, to show people that they are free…" (Warnock, 1). There are notable affinities between existentialism and transcendentalism. Both express the need for human beings to accept the fact that someone can be personally free if that person takes control over his own life, making his own decisions, whatever the opinions of his surroundings are. Williams is not as optimistic as the philosophers backing up this mindset. He implements several small hints, referring to Emerson's transparent eye ball metaphor, which

gives the impression Williams averts Emerson's theory. An example of this are the many references to the characters eyes and expressions but the descriptions seem to be void of any transparency. When Andrews walks into the valley covered in snow to gasp at its grandeur, his eyes get seared by the sunlight which reflects on the snowy surface (John Williams, 238). In Miller's madness there comes a 'sudden blankness" (322) upon his face. Later on in the novel Will recalls the "blue emptiness of Charley Hoge's stare", "the contemptuous look Schneider had given the river just before the hoof had blanked his face" and the "hollow glint in Charley Hoge's eyes" when he witnesses Miller losing it (324). At the close of the novel Andrews even directly questions his first attempt at discovering himself: "Nor could he recall the force of that other passion which had impelled him halfway across a continent into a wilderness where he had dreamed he could find, as a vision, his unalterable self" (John Williams, 324). The novel is critical of such strategies that attempt to give a step by step plan to self-discovery. In this story, these strategies achieve to nothing.

I will now attempt to show how the development of the story can be linked to the theory of one of the most famous existentialists, namely Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's theory is based upon the three phases that made up his emancipated life, the part of his life where he was free from the dominion of his father. These three stages are; the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious stage. Warnock describes the first, aesthetic stage, as a period in which Kierkegaard believed he enjoyed a certain freedom in life. This feeling was created by the death of his father which meant the loss of any overarching authority, but it was a false freedom, simply an illusion which Kierkegaard called the "illusion of objectivity" (Warnock, 7). Kierkegaard does not support the notion of objectivity, since it stands in the way of a completely emancipated human being. To him "objectivity shows itself in the tendency to accept rules governing both behavior

and thought. Any subject-matter which is bound by rules or evidence, or which can be taught in the class-room, is in the grip of objectivity" (Warnock, 8). Examples of such objective studies to Kierkegaard are sociology and psychology. These "attempt to generalize, predict or explain the behavior of human groups or individuals according to scientific laws", even morality can be turned objective "as soon as it is encapsulated in a code or set of rules, which can be passed on from teacher to pupil" (Warnock, 8). A clear discrepancy is arising between Kierkegaard and Emerson although they attempt to attain the same quality in life. The disparity between both ideas is even more noticeable when referring to the objective tendency as that which "proposes to make everyone an observer, and in its maxims to transform him into so objective an observer that he becomes almost a ghost" (Warnock, 8). Compare this to Emerson's theory I touched upon earlier on when he says "I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God…" and it becomes clear that both theories are not complementary.

Kierkegaard blamed the 'scientific myth" for this objective take on life by many people. This myth proclaims "that everything is causally determined, and that therefore in principle a complete and objectively true account of the behavior of everything could be provided, if only we took trouble and observed enough" (Warnock, 8). Kierkegaard dropped this illusion of freedom and ascended a higher stage, the ethical stage. This stage, obviously, is highlighted by ethics. Kierkegaard tries to live his life according to moral principles which were universally recognized. But the freedom he experiences is, once again, an illusion, the illusion of humanism. Warnock writes that this was an illusion "for the ethical laws which were the framework of his life had no transcendental backing, but were derived from human requirements, and fixed social standards" (6-7). This stage had to be abandoned as well to achieve a personal freedom, not a

false freedom, created by society. Kierkegaard eventually arrived at the stage of religion. To him this was the most valuable of all stages, since it was based on an act of blind faith or in Kierkegaard's terms, of subjectivity. Since there is no rational explanation for any religion, Kierkegaard adds most value to religious convictions. They stem from the believer himself and are unaffected by human or scientific influences. Kierkegaard emphasizes the need for a personal relationship with the chosen deity. Mainstream religion, Christianity for example, is also subject to the "scientific myth". The following excerpt, which was already touched upon, proves as much.

> "He was a blasphemer,' Charley Hoge's voice created high and thin…Charley Hoge looked unseeingly down the river; his eyes blinked rapidly, and the muscles of his face twitched uncontrolled, as if his face were falling apart. 'He was a blasphemer,' Charley Hoge said again, and nodded rapidly …' 'He lay with scarlet women and he fornicated and he blasphemed and he took the name of the Lord in vain.' He opened his eyes and turned his unseeing face toward Andrews. 'It's God's will. God's will be done." (Williams, 266)

Blindly accepting every word in the Bible as the truth without reflection teaches you no deeper meaning about the essence of religion. Kierkegaard says that "an objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness" (Warnock, 9). Charley succumbs to this objectivity, for which the scientific myth can once again be blamed. The logic Charley finds in the Bible leads him to believe that everything is action – reaction. Just like a science Charley beliefs that everything can be traced back step by step to an event which triggered everything. In this case Schneider's death is a logical event caused by his visits to prostitutes and him saying the lord's name in vain. The Bible predicts punishment when such activities are posed, thus the log killing

Schneider is a logical thing to happen. The objectivity of Andrews's companions dooms his experience from the very beginning.

Andrews' trip is his religious stage, or at least an attempt to ascending this highest stage, keeping in mind that nature is proclaimed as the divine force. Andrews alienates himself completely from the life he led up to then, controlled by the rules and behavioral laws thrusted upon him by society and institutes such as Harvard. He attempts to construct his personal identity by submerging himself in a naturalistic lifestyle, but Andrews dooms his personal mission from the very beginning by looking at Emerson's theory as some kind of practical manual, instructing him what to do in order to be able to define himself. This is a clear example of the scientific myth and shows Andrews as being not that different than Charley. He goes into nature to become "transparent" but he remains an objective observer and is still blind to Kierkegaard's illusion of humanism. Andrews does not become transparent or independent from societal influences or moral standards since he, without being fully aware, is still entangled in a social construction which arises in their search party. This social construct is the class society which was the dominant ruling system in the Middle Ages and remained relevant up until the introduction of the different industries and the creation of a middle class.

This society consisted out of three classes: the aristocracy, the clergy and the third class which housed all the commoners, mainly farmers. The system had its own logic so that each class could benefit from it. The aristocracy its main task was protection for both the farmers and the clergy, this clergy prayed for the salvation of the souls of both remaining classes and the commoners provided food and other goods for their physical and religious protectors. Each member of the hunting party fulfills its own role in this system. Miller represents the aristocracy. He is king on his domain, he knows the prairie and he knows the men need him to get them out

there alive. Miller never seems to stress in a problematic situation (see the part dealing with internal wilderness for examples). He is confident enough to believe that he makes the right decisions for him and his "people". All this seems to indicate that, just like a king, Miller believes that nature chose him to be the leader. He seems to think that he represents some higher power which grants him strength and wisdom to survive perilous situations. Miller remains calm in perilous situations and handles them like a leader as if somehow he is aware they will remain unharmed as long as he is in charge of their party. Charley Hoge stands for the clergy. In times of crisis, he clings on to his faith and prays desperately in the belief that this will exempt him from physical harm. He is also completely dependent on Miller, the aristocracy, for survival. Charley seems to worship Miller and depends, next to God, entirely on him for survival. When Miller turns mad he burns all the bales of hides, owned by MacDonald, Charley fails to distance himself from him: "As Miller went away, Charley Hoge moved from the two men and shambled after him." (John Williams, 320). Fred Schneider embodies the middle class which toppled over this three class system. Whenever an important decision has to be made there is a momentary power struggle between Schneider and Miller, as if both are fighting for authority over their small group. When the men desperately try to find water Schneider starts to question Miller's decision making skills.

> "Miller said: 'there's nothing to worry about. I'll get you to water, if I have to dig for it. 'God damn it,' Schneider said. "You son of a bitch. I'm half a mind to cut out on my own. I might just make it.'
>
> 'And you might not,' Miller said. 'Do you know this country, Fred?'
>
> 'You know damn well I don't,' Schneider said.
>
> 'Then you'd better stick with the party.'

> Schneider looked from one of them to another. 'You're pretty sure the party's going to stick with you?" (Williams, 106-7)

Schneider always gives in but does not withhold his critique when Miller makes a mistake. Miller is only able to maintain leadership by emphasizing his own superiority. Schneider's obedience to Miller ultimately leads to him drowning in the river, which would have never happened had Schneider been more assertive since he suggested leaving the valley earlier. This would have meant not wading through a river with heightened water levels due to melted snow. Considering how the fur market collapsed during their expedition, these verbal power duels between Miller and Schneider mirror the behavior of their representative classes during times of social change, like for example during the Industrial Revolution.

For Andrews this means that he cannot achieve his goal since he was never fully removed from social influences. He is still forced to function in a social system unknowingly installed by the members of the party which enabled Andrews to microscopically observe the defaults in that system. At the end of the novel Andrews realizes that these men, like him, are slaves to the same system they inhabit, only they do not realize it and confuse their isolation on the land with personal freedom but instead they are slave to the land, relying on it for survival and social prestige. Andrews considers men like Miller free men, but witnesses the direct opposite when Miller loses his mind upon realizing that his job, his vocation, has become superfluous. Miller is therefore never as free as he thought, since his lifestyle was a logical cause of his vocation. His episode on the horse, burning down all the bales of hides out of rage, symbolizes his fall from grace, the loss of the divine status he cast upon himself. Andrews is a witness to this all and the myth of the freemen of the American west is debunked. Furthermore McDonald, the man who led him to Miller in the first place, places Andrews in a category of

young men who seem to draw parallels between their own blank state of mind and the vast emptiness of the American West:

> "Young people,' McDonald said contemptuously. 'You always think there's something to find out.' …
>
> 'Well, there's nothing,' McDonald said. 'You get born, and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies in school. You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you – that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done. Only you ain't done it, because the lies told you there was something else. Then you know you could have had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only then it's too late. You're too old." (Williams, 296)

After this conversation with McDonald and witnessing the mental decay of both Miller and Charley, Andrews realizes that as long as he stays among people, he will never be fully free from the influences from society and become one with nature. His solo departure marks this realization and the subsequent elevation into an unidentified stage or the redoing of the religious phase but now without human influences, only a pure individual relationship with nature.

Butcher's Crossing acknowledges the different phases introduced by Kierkegaard and through Andrews creates a surrogate experience for readers to experience what it means to deliberately start a new part or stage of your life while at the same time highlighting the difficulties in attempting such an endeavor. Andrews' faith, his religion, was nature, but there was no particular valuable experience he gained from being surrounded by nature since there was still a social structure installed. Williams emphasizes the need of an isolated, personal experience. This becomes clear in the novel's final paragraph: "Except for the general direction

he took, he did not know where he was going; but he knew that it would come to him later in the day. He rode forward without hurry, and felt behind him the sun slowly rise and harden the air" (Williams, 326). This open-endedness suggests that there is something to be learned if one starts his life anew in an environment void of any civilized influences. However, to both the protagonist and narrator this lessons remains a mystery. This vagueness is intentional since no two people will reach a similar conclusion. The novel emphasizes the singularity of every human being, the quest for an identity has to be a personal one that can only be achieved through extensive isolation and retrospective reflection on one's personality. This is another direct link to Kierkegaard. A free man to Kierkegaard is 'self-governing". He is creative in his isolation. Removed from the supports of morality, law and institutionalized religion and learning a man has to think for himself (Warnock, 13). At the close of the novel, Andrews has already made more progression to achieve what he set out for in the first place then after his entire trip with the other men.

3.7 Westerns following *Butcher's Crossing*

Cormac McCarthy is a critically acclaimed novelist, who wrote quite a few Westerns himself. The three novels that make up his *Border Trilogy* tell the adventures of modern day cowboys, men who herd cattle. *All the Pretty Horses* is the first book in the trilogy, written thirty two years after Williams's first novel. The following excerpt is the final paragraph from this first novel:

> "He touched the horse with his heels and rode on. He rode with the son coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a

> single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come.' (McCarthy, 310)

When we compare this to the final passage in *Butcher's Crossing,* striking similarities become visible:

> "He gathered the reins firmly in one hand, touched his horse's flanks with his heels, and rode into the open country. Except for the general direction he took, he did not know where he was going; but he knew that it would come to him later in the day. He rode forward without hurry, and felt behind him the sun slowly rise and harden the air." (Williams, 326)

Both endings show similarities and illustrate the innovating way in which Williams wrote. McCarthy's books became wildly popular while Williams's book lives a life in obscurity. McCarthy utilizes the genre conventions that come with the postfrontier Western in order to create a dramatic love story. The lonely, isolated wanderer finds love, but it is an impossible one and at the close of the novel the hero finds himself alone, unaware of a meaningful direction.

Lyon's remark on the postfrontier tradition of novels set in the American west that "in the succeeding generations of western novelists, one does not see quite the intensity of preoccupation with overcoming myth and establishing a true West. It is as if a revolution has been secured, and now a writer is simply free … to write about anything he or she pleases" (728). Williams' account of the cruelty of the American West, linked to an existentialist undertone, was an uncommon theme in the sixties. So although Williams respected and acknowledged the Western tradition, through *Butcher's Crossing,* Williams helped to emancipate the genre and make it available for content material with contemporary relevance. McCarthy's novel proves Williams's innovativeness since he, thirty years later, seemingly

implements a similar existentialist undertone. Andrew's problematic identity construction is something McCarthy recognized as contemporary. McCarthy confirms Williams' status as an innovative writer since he, as a "free" writer, takes the same thematic approach as Williams did, while Williams still took tradition into consideration.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I first distinguished a subdivision within the literature dealing with the American west and displayed how Williams' first novel *Butcher's Crossing* belongs to one class, the postfrontier Western, but certainly deals with the aspects of the other as well. Afterwards I attempted to show how the existentialist influences, which found their way into the story, gravely affected the course of the story. It were these influences which largely guided the plot of the story. These existentialist influences played an important role in the character description and development. I eventually stated that it was the characterization which had the greatest effect on the plot of the story. Eventually, it were Andrews' companions, and the way they had evolved over time, which made him reach certain conclusions about his personal quest. The novel seems set in the American west specifically because of the way this area influences the fictional characters while the, unmentioned, theme of existentialism is the driving force which carries to story to some sort of resolution but affects everything. Williams clearly was not finished with the theme of existentialism when he finished *Butcher's Crossing.* In the next chapter I will discuss his second book, *Stoner,* and again approach it from an existentialist point of view. This novel shows a different take on the philosophical theme though. The protagonist in *Stoner,* William Stoner, is faced with the same problems as Will Andrews but he reaches a resolution relatively early. The novel mainly narrates Stoner overcoming situations which threaten to destroy his defined identity and his struggle to maintain this identity. Once again the philosophical theme

interacts with the generic conventions which leads to a novel that stands out against other examples in the genre. The next chapter will discuss *Stoner,* the second book Williams wrote. He left the American west behind and set the story between the walls of the university.

4 Stoner

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed Williams' first novel, *Butcher's Crossing*. It showed how the setting of the story lent itself perfectly to accommodate the existentialist theme that is prominent in the novel. Visible references to this existentialist theme were discussed in the chapter: the creation of personal identity, removed from urbanized areas; the struggle to attach an authentic meaning to one's existence while being faced with new truths and beliefs that contradict religious dogma; the subsequent loss of a valuable religion, which was seen to be so valuable because it had the ability to console people in their struggle with contemporary evolutions. Christianity paid little attention to scientific progress, except when its reliability was undeniably refuted by science. This turned out to be a critical mistake since it were the discoveries made in, and questions that arose from the variety of scientific disciplines that undermined the fundamentals of Christianity. Kierkegaard proclaimed subjectivity was the answer to overcoming these existential difficulties. In *Butcher's Crossing,* William Andrews alienates himself from his surroundings and through personal reflection attempts to find subjective truths which he can personally value. Accomplishing this task proves to be much more difficult than one might imagine since the novel does not arrive at a conclusion on the subject. John Williams's second novel deals with many of the same issues as its predecessor, yet the author approaches them in a different way. *Stoner* comes to terms with, and tries to answer, what was left open in *Butcher's Crossing*. One must keep in mind that whilst there are no definite answers to any of these philosophical questions, such as those dealing with the construction of a valuable identity, *Stoner* highlights that there are different approaches. This chapter will focus on John Williams's second

novel, *Stoner*. I will define *Stoner* as an academic and further point out how it deviates from the academic genre conventions. I will argue that this deviation is an effect caused by the implementation of existentialist influences. Comparing these results to those from the previous chapter, I will conclude that the relevance of the existentialist theme supersedes the generic conventions. This, to some extent, is responsible for the generic deviation that ultimately becomes a key characteristic of John Williams' work. .

4.2 Plot Summary

Stoner tells the story of William Stoner, born in 1891 and raised on a farm in Booneville, Missouri. Seeing their income diminish with each passing year, Stoner's parents decide to send him to the University of Columbia. A new agriculture program had just started and Stoner has to attend the course in order to discover the latest farming techniques. Stoner himself is quite indifferent about the whole matter, only wondering whether or not his parents could manage all of the work by themselves. Inevitably, Stoner sets off to university and is immediately impressed by its grandeur. Despite his initial impression, he remains a stoic, isolated character, withdrawn from the student life and also sees his studies as a duty rather than a privilege. This all changes in his second year when he takes a compulsory course in English literature. Compared to the scientific logic of his science courses, Stoner finds the study of literature extremely complicated, yet compelling at the same time. In one class, Professor Archer Sloane singles Stoner out, to answer a question about a Shakespearean sonnet but is unable to and, Stoner is subsequently so intrigued about the subject that he withdraws from his agricultural courses and changes the focus of his study to English literature. This does not go unnoticed by Archer Sloane. A later meeting between Sloan and the protagonist, who is still cast with self-doubt, reveals Sloane's faith in his

student, opening Stoner's eyes to the possibilities of his own future. "But don't you know, Mr Stoner?" Sloane asked. "Don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher" (19). For Stoner, this is a revelation and he embraces this function almost immediately. After a painful encounter with his parents in which he informs them of his decision, Stoner returns to the university permanently.

The novel chronicles the life of William Stoner on campus. Stoner's life is portrayed as a relatively simple existence, altered only by certain encounters with other key characters. Edith, Hollis Lomax and Charles Walker – his wife, the chairman of the department and a troublesome student respectively – are instigators of much of the unhappiness brought upon Stoner. This is juxtaposed with other characters who feature in Stoner's life: Gordon Finch, the Dean, Katherine Driscoll, his lover and Grace, his daughter, all bring about periods of contentment as well. Whilst these key figures dominate Stoner's social life, it is his love for teaching and his passion for the material that is key to the foundation of his identity. The novel ends with Stoner reflecting upon his own life, followed by his death.

4.3 The Academic or Campus Novel

Before I turn to *Stoner* I will give a brief overview of the academic and campus fiction. When you search for "campus novel" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the following definition appears: "A novel, usually comic or satirical, in which the action is set within the enclosed world of a university (or similar seat of learning) and highlights the follies of academic life. Many novels have presented nostalgic evocations of college days, but the campus novel in the usual modern sense dates from the 1950s" ("Campus Novel"). The presumption that the campus novel is mainly satirical is stressed by many academics. Jeanne Marie Rose, in her article on the

composition of the academic novel, mentions that the recurring characteristic in attempting to define the campus novel is: "a structure that follows the academic calendar, plots that alternatively feature a quest for membership in the academy or a struggle to escape from it, and a satirical flavor geared toward critique" (58). Furthermore Péter Székely also discusses, in his dissertation on the metafictional academic novel, the use of satire by writers of academic fiction. He writes that "they [academic novels] are identified as satires and the distortions of reality they contain are endorsed as admissible violations of the mimetic principle arising from their satirical impulse" (4). As readers, we forgive and even appreciate the exaggerations and ironies, simply because we recognize them as such. Indeed, humor has little respect for authority. Professors who are discontent with university policy are able to vent their frustration through their fictional characters. The use of satire is also fueled by a desire to criticize. Novelists of academic fiction highlight flaws and through their fiction, attempt to convey warnings or methods of improvement. The use of their satire therefore allows, writers of academic fiction to reflect upon their experiences in the real world.

Robert Scott quotes David Lodge, who wrote an extensive amount of campus fiction himself. Lodge asserts that "the university is a kind of microcosm of society at large, in which the principles, drives, and conflicts that govern collective human life are displayed and may be studied in a clear light and on a manageable scale" (qtd. in Scott 85). Similarly, Leslie Fiedler describes the academic novel as "a sub-genre of the novel which treats the academic community as a microcosm reflecting the great world, an adequate symbol of our total society" (5). Those who write academic novels take societal structures and apply them to smaller settings, such as a college campus, as the title of the genre would suggest. Indeed, the campus is intended to represent the conventions, structures and social interactions of society and it is undoubtedly

apparent that author's intention is to magnify such features of society in a smaller setting. Székely underlines how crucial it is for an academic novel to pursue realism in order for it to be accepted as such: "In other words, an academic novel is either praised for the recognizability and accountability of its academe-related content, or condemned for the lack of it. Deviations from this fundamentally mimetic principle are normally not tolerated" (4). The use of satire to take a step back from the present situation, however, seemed to be an exception of such principles because it made it highlighted the author's intention to make society's flaws more apparent to the reader.

Academia underwent major changes after the Second World War. There was a high need for academic personnel and this was exemplified by the fact that people with no background in teaching were able to apply for these positions. Consequently, universities sought professional writers to convey their knowledge to students. Although he might exaggerate by using "most," Joseph Bottum states in his article *The End of the Academic Novel* that "the flow of academic novels has turned into a torrent, written mostly by actual academics as the rise of writing programs turned most of America's writers into college professors and the mockable turns of contemporary academia persuaded most of America's college professors to try their hands at satirical novels" (qtd. In Scott, 81). Indeed, John Williams obtained his degree in English literature through the GI bill after fighting in the Second World War. He quickly found a job at the University of Denver and his function grew over time. In his review of the work of John Williams, most notably that of *Stoner*, Alan Prendergast quotes Gerald Chapman, former chair of the department that Williams himself was a part of. He elaborates on Williams's workload at the university, stating that, "in addition to teaching prosody, the modern novel and other English courses, Williams had built the writing program into one of the most academically demanding in

the country, reasoning that most writers would have to find teaching jobs in order to support themselves" (qtd. in Prendergast). It is reasonable to assert that Williams was indeed aware of this trend which was encouraged by both new writers and university professors alike, to vent their critique within the academic realm or rather, use this as a launching pad for their career by discussing the context they were most familiar with. Leslie Fiedler discusses the American writer working at a university. He notes that "rather than being protected from the bourgeois world, he [American writer] is plunged into it, immersed in its small politics and petty spites, its institutionalized hypocrisy, its self-righteous timidity and its endless bureaucratic ineptitude" (10).

Until now I have been using the terms "academic" and "campus" freely to define this entire class of novels. Jeffrey Williams wrote an article on the rise of the academic novel in which he makes a clear distinction between the academic novel and the campus novel. This division is based on different protagonists used in each class. His division in the genre is based on the protagonists used in each subclass. Campus novels, according to J. Williams, "tend to revolve around campus life and present young adult comedies or dramas, most frequently coming-of-age narratives" (561-62). Eric Leuschner, on the other hand, makes the following observation: "at the beginning of the century, campus, student-centered novels clearly outnumbered academic, staff-centered novels, but by the eighties and nineties the numbers had reversed" (339). Campus novels thus place the emphasis on how the adolescent perceives themselves and others while on campus and how these student experiences affect the construction of their personal identity. Academic novels feature the academic personnel present on campus: "academic novels feature those who work as academics, although the action is rarely confined to a campus, and they portray adult predicaments in marriage and home as well as the

workplace, most familiarly yielding mid-life crisis plots" (Jeffrey Williams, 562). Defined identities unravel in academic fiction and in some way repeat the process that the student undergoes in the campus novel but in a much more pressing manner. Jeffrey Williams' premier parameter of comparison seems aged. Depending on the kind of narrative, a different age group is selected in order to deal with different content material. With *Stoner,* however, John Williams seemed to ignore the discrepancy.

The fictional depiction of the professor has changed over time and this has coincided with the change in public perception, of the professor's role as an academic figure within the university. In his aforementioned article, Jeffrey Williams chronologically discusses the dominant ideas on the character. He distinguishes three different stages in the academy or campus novel history, each period stressing a different characterization of the professor. Throughout every stage in the history of the academic or campus novel, which began around the start of the 20th century, writers and readers have been drawn to the enclosed physical space of the university and the possibilities that such an environment provided. Jeffrey Williams writes that these early novels "readily merge with the murder mystery because they depict a world insulated from everyday concerns and that assumes ease and leisure" (563). The enclosed space of the university was a perfect host for the murder mystery. It assumes the murder suspect to be present within its boundaries and automatically limits the number of suspects. In the first decades after World War II the academic novel saw a spike in production and popularity. Where earlier readers had been drawn to the adventures of the student within the campus novel, interests then shifted towards the professors and their critical take on university life. After the war, more and more people attended colleges and recognized the importance of a quality education. This enormous influx of students brought about an increasing amount of critique on educational

policy and the behavior of professors and other university personnel. Jeffrey Williams defines these academic novels "largely set in small colleges, turning on intra-academic machinations, and are often corrosive about the academic enterprise" (563). Change came around the late 1960s, when the academic novel was removed from its enclosed space and given a place in the outside world. The focus shifted from the system, to the individual. In this class of academic novels, the protagonist's worries expand the academic sphere and become familiar to the readers. Jeffrey Williams defines this class of novels as the mid-life novel that "often portrays a hapless professor but focuses on the protagonist at midcareer, usually in his or her forties or fifties and dealing with the loss of youthful promise … The protagonist struggles with career disappointments, marital slump, and indecision, which precipitate a crisis, thus generating the plot, but the novels are usually comedies and reparative…" (571). No longer discussing and criticizing the internal machine that drives the university, the subject is now the personal mindset and extra-curricular problems of the academic. The subsequent two decades, the 1970s and 1980s, brought about another set of changes. The focus was still on the personal life of the professor but took a turn to the romantic where "the major trend … was the affair novel … [which] invert[ed] the standard marriage plot and turn on a professor's adultery, typically with a student, sometimes suggesting the libratory side of sexual experimentation and other times the destructive side, as his wife and family suffer" (564-65). Such novels use the academic character because of his expected devotedness to his field of study. When intellectual endeavors are replaced by sexual desires the stereotypical image of the professor is shattered and we are provided with romantic narratives of men and women struggling between calls of the mind and the heart. The final stage in the evolution of the academic novel as suggested by Jeffrey Williams, developed in the final decade of the 20th century. Williams proclaims that "around

1990, the academic novel experienced a new surge, becoming a theater of the culture wars as well as marital wars, and also of middle-class angst and professional job concerns" (565). Today, the academic novel returns to its original, satirizing, function. Arguably, it is now the product of generations of adaptation, due to the many influences that modified its content, and is now, as a result, able to host a variety of themes.

Important to note is how the academic novel seemingly functions as a host for thematic material with closer relations to another kind of narrative. The physical setting of the academy attracted those who wrote murder mysteries, the stereotypical image of the quiet, isolated professor who motivated others to write the mid-life crisis narrative, and those who wrote fiction of sex and divorce were able to link their story material to the desired moral standard obtained by the professor and the subsequent break from it. As Jeffrey Williams points out in his article, these trends followed each other over time and were dependent on the contemporary interests of readers and writers. Scott further clarifies and supports such a statement on the adaptive nature of the genre of academic or campus fiction. He argues, "… the academic novel is a vital and aesthetically rich literary genre that has continually evolved in order to meet the demands of its large and ever-expanding readership" (82). Williams was seemingly aware of the generic conventions and the internal division within the genre when he composed *Stoner.* In the next chapter I will show how the novel implements these conventions, yet arguably, is still seen as highly innovative.

4.4 *Stoner* as a Coherent Blend

Stoner assumes a special position within the tradition of the academic or campus novel. Linking it to traditional conventions of the genre might seem more of a challenge than one might think. Existentialist influences are noticeable in *Stoner*, just as they are in *Butcher's Crossing*. They

are, to some extent, responsible for the difficulty in pinpointing *Stoner* within the literary tradition of academic fiction. *Stoner* addresses the human condition and the associated and inevitable insecurity of it. Essential to the novel is the full scope of Stoner's life. Indeed, without this perspective, one would not be able to witness the very existentialist nature of Stoner's life.

An early difficulty arises however, when we apply Jeffrey Williams' distinction between the academic and the campus novel, to *Stoner*. The novel seemingly belongs to both groups. This section will demonstrate the ways in which *Stoner* is an incredibly diverse novel, blending together several aspects that Jeffrey Williams touched upon in different subdivisions of the academic genre. This will also prove Williams' innovativeness as a writer of academic fiction. The first chapter of the book details Stoner's experiences as a student at the university and can thus be seen as belonging to the campus novel tradition. Jeffrey Williams defined this class as being "most frequently coming-of-age narratives" (562). The following chapters document Stoner's rise in the faculty. From the very moment that Stoner is employed at the university, one can argue that the novel evolves into one that is academic in nature, despite the fact that the coming-of-age process has hardly finished.

4.4.1 *Stoner* as a Campus Novel

Stoner's entire life, up until the age of 23, is crammed into a single chapter. Despite this, it still manages to provide us with a valuable character description of Stoner. This description is necessary since it provides a point of reference from which the reader is able to evaluate Stoner. Thus, changes that occur throughout the protagonist's life become clearly visible for the duration of the novel. The most important changes are in the early stages of the book with Stoner's sudden interest and love for English literature. This is an unexpected love thrust upon him, and this new love entailed the break from his old life on the farm. Stoner's confrontation with the

Shakespearean sonnet leaves him feeling reborn and the reader is able to perceive that something indefinable changes within him; he is however, too shocked to realize what such a sudden internal change means. This is exemplified by the following excerpt, which shows Stoner's bafflement when confronted with Shakespeare.

> 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 … 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 the blunt finger-end; 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 (*Stoner*, 11-12)

Stoner looks at his hands as if it were the very first time he sees them. He feels a sense of alienation as if they belonged to someone else. Faced with the undefinable, Stoner becomes aware of his personal existence: "he thought he could feel the blood flowing." This moment is the impetus of Stoner's awakening, where the reader recognizes a moment of self-awareness. We are made aware of Stoner's personal changes through his personal observations, but a true and definite reason as to why he suddenly changed his study is omitted. The change in Stoner's academic career is mentioned matter-of-factly: "In the second semester of that school year William Stoner dropped his basic science courses and interrupted his Ag School sequence; he took introductory courses in philosophy and ancient history and two courses in English literature" (13). The decision and the reasoning behind it cannot be described adequately as they stem from the most personal thought processes and ideas. Stoner's sudden attraction to literature is described as "an epiphany of knowing something through words that could not be put in

words … It was a knowledge of which he could not speak, but one which changed him, once he had it, so that no one could mistake its presence" (100). In his essay: "The Inner lives of Men", Morris Dickstein describes how "in literature he [Stoner] senses a depth of human understanding beyond his power to express" (Dickstein). Readers get the impression that Stoner is aware of the reasons behind his actions, yet he is simply unable to process them in a coherent way, and this is clearly evident through the ambiguous description in the novel. The extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator here has a limited omniscience and Stoner's psyche is never fully exposed. Even in fiction, some aspects of character and personality remain inscrutable, as is the case in real life.

The coming-of-age phase evolves and is completed once Stoner explains to his parents that he will not only not be returning to the farm, but rather, will remain on campus to obtain his masters and doctoral degree. This break from parental authority and support is essential for Stoner's construction of his own personal identity. Indeed, he recognizes it as such: "He felt his inadequacy to the goal he had so recklessly chosen and felt the attraction of the world he had abandoned. He grieved for his own loss and for that of his parents, and even in his grief felt himself being drawn away from them" (John Williams, 21). The moment he chose to live the life of a scholar marked his the first step away from who he was before. Coming to terms with this decision and relating it to his parents seems to be a heavy burden on Stoner who "tried to explain to his father what he intended to do, tried to evoke in him his own sense of significance and purpose. He listened to his words fall as if from the mouth of another, and watched his father's face, which received those words as a stone receives the repeated blows of a fist" (22). Even when faced with his parents their pain and distress when they learn of his decision, Stoner perseveres because he senses the importance that the choice will have on the remainder of his

life. Indeed, Stoner's life at the university ultimately defines him. It is in its corners and hallways that he discovers himself and his true vocation. The simple fact that he belongs there dawns upon him after a conversation with Archer Sloane, his literature professor, who points out what Stoner was not able to realize: that he will be a teacher. "But don't you know, Mr Stoner?" Sloane asked. "Don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher" (John Williams, 19). When he leaves the meeting, Stoner sees and feels the university in a different way. "He brushed against the polished wooden walls in the corridor, and he thought he could feel the warmth and age of the wood; he went slowly down the stairs and wondered at the veined cold marble that seemed to slip a little beneath his feet" (John Williams, 19). Stoner's veined hands from the previous excerpt are compared to the veined marble stairs of the university. For Stoner, the university comes to life when he discovers its relevance to his personal existence because, for the first time in his life, passion emerges. Before he discovered literature, Stoner was quite indifferent about his academic performance: "At the end of his first year his grade average was slightly below a B; he was pleased that it was no lower and not concerned that it was not higher" (John Williams, 7). The discovery of his love for literature aids in constructing his identity. But as any other, Stoner's personality is prone to change. At the start of his academic career he is defined by his love for language and his idealist, naïve take on teaching.

4.4.2 *Stoner* as an Academic Novel

The bulk of the novel depicts Stoner as an academic. From the moment he starts teaching as a doctoral student, he becomes entangled in the internal structure of the university. The campus becomes his home and what happens outside of it, does not really influence Stoner's mood, unless it irrevocably alters the university structures. Chapter three of *Stoner*, in which Stoner's

academic career commences, depicts a cheerful Stoner, unfazed by political events in the outside world.

> Two weeks after Stoner received his Bachelor of Arts degree, Archduke Francis Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist; and before autumn war was general all over Europe. It was a topic of continuing interest among the older students; they wondered about the part America would eventually play, and they were pleasantly unsure of their own futures. But before William Stoner the future lay bright and unchanging. (Williams*,* 24)

Despite the fact that the bulk of the novel focuses on Stoner's life within the realm of the academia, other influences seep in. In what follows I will relate *Stoner* to some of the subdivisions made by Jeffrey Williams that I discussed in the previous chapter and show the difficulty in pinpointing *Stoner* in one of two classes.

First and foremost, Williams did not use the academic setting to house another narrative, such as that of a murder mystery. Similarly, the setting remains essential for *Stoner*. Stoner flees to the safe confines of the university in order to escape the chaos of the outside world. Throughout the story it is emphasized that the university, and indeed the campus as a whole, is not part of the outside world: "Sloane said, 'Are you looking forward to the day when you emerge from these cloistered walls into what some call the world?" Stoner grinned through his embarrassment. "No, sir." (Williams*,* 18). Yet chaos follows him wherever he goes. Fiedler writes that "rather than being protected from the bourgeois world, he [Stoner] is plunged into it, immersed in its small politics and petty spites, its institutionalized hypocrisy, its self-righteous timidity and its endless bureaucratic ineptitude" (10). The enclosed space in *Stoner* functions as a representation of the outside world, albeit on a smaller scale. I refer back to David Lodge, who

defined the university as "a kind of microcosm of society at large" (qtd. in Scott, 85). Williams refrains from being overly satirical though; the focus is on objectively transmitting Stoner's mindset and developing identity within this enclosed space against the background of surrogate society.

The academic context is essential to *Stoner* because it serves as the driving force in Stoner's life. Teaching is a vital aspect of Stoner's career; it is one of the few things he is really passionate about. Scott makes an interesting observation about the role that teaching plays in most academic novels. This however, is not the case in *Stoner* because "in the vast majority of academic novels, the overriding implication seems to be that teaching is not an essential component of higher education" (84). Jeffrey Williams further highlights that "given his [the new professor] preoccupation with writing rather than teaching on a campus, [Saul Bellow's fictional professor] Herzog augurs the new professor arising in the 1960s, devoted to research" (564). Once again, it is seemingly difficult to apply this quote to *Stoner.* There are however, hints of Stoner's attempts to devote himself to research where "emboldened by his new success as a teacher and by his growing popularity among the better graduate students, he started a new book in the summer of 1930" (John Williams, 122). But every time Stoner attempts to achieve something that is meaningful to him, his wife, Edith, thwarts him. She invades his study and claims it for herself, banishing Stoner to his university office. She manages to demotivate Stoner in his attempts for academic success: "But he had room in his office for only a few of his books, and his work on his manuscript was often interrupted because he did not have the necessary texts … He lost interest in his book; his work slowed and came to a halt" (John Williams, 131). It is clear to the reader that Stoner's true vocation is teaching because the most thrilling and exciting moments in the book take place when we are given a glimpse at the professionalism

with which Stoner approaches his duty as a teacher. It is in these situations that Stoner's apathy crumbles and he becomes an authority. Importantly, Stoner's passion for teaching, and indeed the university itself, emerges when he continuously fights the corruption that is apparently present at the university. He battles the inadequate Charles Walker, who attempts to obtain his doctoral degree. Walker is backed by Hollis Lomax, the chair of the English department, and while Stoner realizes that his reluctance to cooperate in the Walker-case will only sour his relationship with Lomax, Stoner cannot go against the fundamental principles of being a teacher. If he forsook those, he would be without identity. The following excerpts show Stoner's unwavering opinion when the question arises whether or not the incompetent Walker deserves to pass. "Come off it, Holly,' Stoner said tiredly. 'The man's incompetent. There can be no question of that. The questions I asked him were those that should have been asked a fair undergraduate; and he was unable to answer a single one of them satisfactorily. And he's both lazy and dishonest…" (John Williams, 166).

When the other members on Walker's jury are willing to grant him another opportunity to defend his competence, Stoner irrevocably resists this notion:

> "No," Stoner said. "I must vote for failure."
>
> "God damn it," Lomax shouted. "Do you realize what you're doing, Stoner? Do you realize what you're doing to the boy?"
>
> "Yes," Stoner said quietly, "and I'm sorry for him. I am preventing him from getting his degree, and I'm preventing him from teaching in a college or university. Which is precisely what I want to do. For him to be a teacher would be a—disaster." (John Williams, 167-68)

Stoner's denial in granting Walker a pass does not arise from feelings of disdain towards Walker or Lomax. On the contrary, the novel even hints at admiration felt by Stoner towards Walker.

"After he became used to his anger Stoner found a reluctant and perverse admiration stealing over him. However florid and imprecise, the man's powers of rhetoric and invention were dismayingly impressive; and however grotesque, his presence was real" (John Williams, 146). Stoner only judges Walker on his grasp of the theoretical knowledge and his qualities as a potential teacher. He sees himself as a protector of the values that the university stands for; it is his task to keep the corrupt and incapable out of it. Standing firmly behind his principles and beliefs also confirms his status as an individual who does not waver when his principles are under siege. He furthermore does not criticize people's personalities, but rather whether or not they deserve accommodation in the institute he holds so dear.

Moreover, it is interesting to note how both Lomax and Walker display some form of physical handicap. Eric Leuschner wrote an essay in which he takes a closer look at the bodily disfigurement of fictitious academics. Both Lomax and Walker are physically disabled. Lomax is described in the following way: "… his body was grotesquely misshapen. A small hump raised his left shoulder to his neck, and his left arm hung laxly at his side. His upper body was heavy and curved … his legs were thin, and he walked with a hitch in his stiff right leg" (John Williams, 93). From the outset, Stoner he notices that Walker's "left arm hung stiffly at his side, and his left foot dragged as he walked" (John Williams*,* 133). Ironically, Walker and Lomax, are the least disabled people compared to the rest of the characters. Leuschner claims that "their infirmity is on the surface only—they know how to play the game and will succeed in the academy despite their physical infirmity of unsound scholarship" (342). Their disability is physical and visible. In *Stoner*, the truly disabled people are those who belong in the university. This idea is voiced through David Masters, one of Stoner's only friends. Masters defines the university as "an asylum or … a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the

otherwise incompetent" (John Williams, 29). Later, Masters describes how both Stoner and, Gordon Finch belong in this "asylum" because the real world would devour them for their incompetence or naivety. Lomax and Walker are shrewd and clever enough to survive in the real world, and their disabled status confirms their presence as alien. Indeed they are the disabled that belong in the outside world and this is juxtaposed with the 'disability' that Masters, Finch and Stoner possess, inhibiting them from success outside of the university environment. Their malpractice threatens the integrity of the university. Long after Masters died, Stoner recollects the talk they had about the nature of the university as "… an asylum, a refuge from the world, for the dispossessed, the crippled. But he didn't mean Walker. Dave would have thought of Walker as – as the world. And we can't let him in. For if we do, we become like the world, just as unreal …" (John Williams, 172).

This character depiction follows the evolution suggested by Jeffrey Williams in the academic novel after the Great War. Although the novel largely respects the university boundaries, the novel transcends these confines through characters that do not belong there. These characters serve a distinct purpose: they serve as a critique of the outside world and its influences on the values professed by the university and further, the chaos it causes in the intra-academic machinations. "He [Stoner] resented the disruption which the war forced upon the University; but he could find in himself no very strong feelings of patriotism, and he could nog bring himself to hate the Germans" (John Williams, 33). The influence of the outside world on the innermost workings of the university is discussed, but the novel focuses mainly on the effects that these influences have on Stoner and the ways in which they contribute to the construction and development of his identity. The academic novel of the 1960s focused mainly

on the individual and it is clear that *Stoner* does not stray from this narrative construction. J. Williams defined those as “mid-life crisis narratives” (564).

Finally, it can be seen *Stoner* fits in the class of narratives that detail sex and divorce which became popular around the 1970s and 1980s. Stoner’s wife Edith, unlike the protagonist himself, never succeeds in discovering the aspects in life that define her. She is a restless soul, always transforming herself, and is ultimately never able to find an aspect of life that defines and establishes herself as a unique individual. She foregoes her Europe trip, under the illusion that she might find her vocation in marriage, but it is almost as if she is aware of her ever-changing personality: “I’ll try to be a good wife to you, William’ she said. ‘I’ll try” (John Williams, 62). She attempts to be a housewife but grows tired of the routine quickly. She thinks that becoming a mother will bring solace, so she desperately wants a child, but when she finally gives birth she distances herself from the child and falls into a depression. “For nearly a year after the birth of Grace, Edith remained partly bedridden…though the doctor could find no specific trouble” (John Williams, 88). Later, when her father dies, she erases every trace of him, revealing a potential troubled relationship. She undergoes a physical metamorphoses and surrounds herself with a new social group. She wishes to present herself as an independent woman, free of any male oppression and radically different from the woman she was before. “She wanted (she said) a change in herself. She had too long been what she was; she spoke of her childhood, of her marriage … she fixed an image that she wished to fulfill” (John Williams, 120). However, a reoccurring pattern emerges and Edith is once again dissatisfied and quickly loses interest. The only constant in Edith’s life is her tendency to fall ill regularly without explanation. Davis McElroy, in his book *Existentialism and Modern Literature* calls illness ‘the malaise of an inauthentic existence” (53). Despite the fact that Edith is a tragic figure, her acts of

cruelty towards Stoner prevent the reader from sympathizing with her character. Her callousness towards Stoner is undoubtedly caused by jealousy. She envies Stoner's unwavering interest and devotion to his field of study. She is able to perceive that Stoner's love for teaching and literature compels him. He is defined by his passion, whereas she continuously alters her identity, struggling to find something authentic. Arguably her life is as tragic as Stoner's. She conforms to what society sets forth as desirable, being a desirable daughter, wife and a mother, hoping it will bring her peace of mind, but it does the exact opposite. In his review of *Stoner,* Tim Kreider writes: "she's [Edith] been raised in an emotional vacuum, taught only useless ornamental skills, sheltered as wholly as possible from reality" (Kreider). Thus when her father dies and the paternal authority disappears, Edith decides to transform herself and erase every trace of her former self, but by then it is already too late. Edith's character demonstrates what an inauthentic existence can do to a person. Transforming one's personality time and time again brings doubt over one's self and this makes it extremely difficult to construct a valuable identity.

Years into his marriage to Edith, Stoner is drawn to one of his students, Katherine Driscoll. Yet Stoner is not star struck by her, he falls in love with her mind before he does with her body. She asks him to read over her dissertation and when he does, he is taken aback by the brilliance of her work.

> "At first only a nervous edge of his mind touched what he read; but gradually the words forced themselves upon him. He frowned and read more carefully. And then he was caught; he turned back to where he had begun, and his attention flowed upon the page… My God, he said to himself in a kind of wonder; and his fingers trembled with excitement as he turned the pages." (John Williams, 190)

After reading her work, Stoner starts to consider her as a person with whom he could form a real romantic connection, rather than a student who needed his help. Under the pretense of aiding her work, he stops by her apartment regularly, dropping off books and articles. The feelings he develops towards her are those of true love, something Stoner desired since he laid eyes on his wife, and it only in his affair that he realizes the meaning of true love.

> "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." (John Williams, 199)

Stoner has to give up this affair eventually and it is shown to be a struggle between his personal desires and the expectations of the outside world, an internal battle that will resurface in William' final novel as well.

Jeffrey Williams writes about the more common love narratives he found in academic fiction: "Early academic novels had often followed marriage plots, a professor courting or pursued by a student, president's daughter, or "local lady," and they were generally chaste" (564). Stoner's love affair is different. He is not the predator stalking his prey, waiting for it to drop its defenses. Their love is mutual and for neither beneficiary, on the contrary, it can only work against them. This makes it so much more valuable. The trend shifted however, and "the 1970s and 1980s novels…turn on a professor's adultery, typically with a student, sometimes suggesting the liberatory side of sexual experimentation and other times the destructive side …" (Jeffrey Williams, 565). *Stoner* clearly belongs to the second tradition; which might even have been introduced by *Stoner* and novels like it.

Stoner transcends the boundaries of the different subdivisions in which the academic novel was subdivided. Instead, it is an amalgamation of these classifications and stands alone, therefore making it hard to classify. The discrepancy between the novel and the academic novel tradition enlarges the feeling that something else is at play. It appears as if the novel is discussing something much larger than simply the life of a forgotten professor. Just like *Butcher's Crossing, Stoner* is loaded with references to existentialism and the novel discusses how Stoner's perspective on life was affected by existentialist theory without Stoner being aware. In the next section I will discuss this existentialist undertone and demonstrate the effects it had on the novel.

4.5 Existentialism in *Stoner*

Just as in *Butcher's Crossing,* Williams's debut novel, *Stoner* has a strong existentialist undertone. Both novels however, depict many important differences. While *Butcher's Crossing* seems largely pessimistic, *Stoner* attempts to deal with what remained a mystery in *Butcher's Crossing*. Important for both novels are the "messengers" who communicate the essence of existentialist philosophy to our protagonists. Even more important is the timing of their revelation. In *Butcher's Crossing* it is McDonalds, the hide trader, who schools the disillusioned Williams upon his return at the close of the novel.

> "Young people," McDonald said contemptuously. "You always think there's something to find out."…"Well there is nothing," McDonald said. "You get born, and you nurse on lies… You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you – that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done…Then you

> know you could have had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only then it's too late. You're too old." (Williams, *Butcher's Crossing,* 295-6)

In *Stoner,* it is Dave Masters, one of Stoner's two friends who is later killed in the war, who voices similar beliefs as McDonald. "You think there's something *here*, something to find. Well, in the world you'd learn soon enough. You, too, are cut out for failure …" (Williams, *Stoner,* 30). The "here" in this excerpt refers to the University of Missouri, but the campus resembles the outside world and is vulnerable to its threats. Attempting to grant any existential meaning to it is as futile as pursuing this in the outside world. The key difference between these novels is that these statements function differently in each. In *Butcher's Crossing,* it is set as a conclusion, which serves to show to Andrews how the futility of his attempt to purposefully search for his true self, is ungraspable. In *Stoner* however, Masters' conclusion is a catalyst. We understand the gravity of what he said, but somehow are still not too concerned since the novel could still work towards a resolution. The numerous setbacks Stoner encounters throughout the rest of his life diminish that hope substantially, and when at the end of the novel, Stoner is bedridden as a result of his cancer we fear that the resolution will remain absent. It is only moments before he dies, when he is drugged on painkillers that Stoner comes to the most valuable conclusion about his existence. His reasoning starts drearily: "Dispassionately, reasonably, he contemplated the failure his life must appear to be" (John Williams, 284). He summarizes the things he had wanted in life: friendship, a good marriage, love and being a good teacher. He obtained every single one of them, or at least came close, yet was never able to hold on to all. He lost friends, saw his marriage crumble and when he found unconditional love, it was taken from him by outsiders. Stoner continually blames himself for these missed opportunities as "he had wanted the singleness and the still connective passion of marriage; he had had that, too, and he had not

known what to do with it, and it had died. He had wanted love; and he had had love, and had relinquished it, had let it go into the chaos of potentiality" (John Williams, 285). When a second voice arises in his head however, he asks the most important question that the novel poses: "What did you expect?"(John Williams, 285). The question is repeated three times and each time it comes up, it lifts him further out of his depressed state. Time blurs together and the reader is not aware of the span between each repetition. After the second time he "feels something heavy pressing upon his eyelids, 286), which is revealed to be daylight. As if it symbolizes a new dawn, Stoner seems to regain some of his strength and he becomes aware of nature surrounding him. He appears to blend with nature: "he heard the rasping of his breath and felt the sweetness of the summer gather in his lungs" (John Williams, 286). Stoner realizes that death is upon him as "he felt also … a shifting somewhere deep inside him, a shifting that stopped something and fixed his head so that it would not move. Then it passed, and he thought, so this is what it is like" (John Williams, 286). He recognizes what is awaiting him, and he seems to approach it with a steady calm. The third time the question is asked a conclusion is reached. Stoner regrets his earlier statement where he "dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure – as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been" (John Williams, 287). And then, seemingly out of nowhere, a resolution is reached: "there was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been" (John Williams, 287). We do not learn what is meant by "he was himself"; no true definition or clarification is provided because none is possible. It is a subjective understanding, one that cannot be communicated to others. Even though the reader has the feeling that they know and understand the essence of Stoner at the end, there is always

that feeling of mystery that shrouds another person's personality, something impenetrable, no matter how familiar you are with someone. It is through his subjectivity, when he ceases to wonder what others might think, that Stoner discovers his true sense of self. In this sudden moment of self-awareness he manages to locate the one book he wrote in his academic career. McDonald, in *Butcher's Crossing,* said: "and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you – that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done" (John Williams, 296). For the hide trader this is the sad conclusion to life. Stoner, on the other hand, embraces death with a feeling of contentment. He accepts his identity and takes pride in what he was able to achieve. He diminishes the academic relevance of his work but "he knew, a small part of him that he could not deny *was* there, and would be there" (John Williams, 288) and he seems to be at ease with who he was.

4.5.1 Background to Existentialist Influences

Stoner's life is dominated by love for simple things. He desperately tries to love his wife, actually loves his mistress and adores his daughter. But nothing supersedes his love for literature and teaching. Kreider writes that "his [Stoner's] life has not been squandered in mediocrity and obscurity; his undistinguished career has not been mulish labor but an act of devotion. He has been a priest of literature, and given himself as fully as he could to the thing he loved" (Kreider). Kreider gives literature an even bigger function than love: "Literature is the true religion of "stoner," and it is this that ultimately redeems Stoner's life" (Kreider). Defining literature as a religion reminds us of Kierkegaard's theory of the three stages and emphasis on subjectivity.

Stoner, however, does not progress through all stages carried forward by Kierkegaard and the ones that he does pass through; he does so in a subjective manner. I will argue that up until Archer Sloane reveals to Stoner his true vocation, he finds himself in the aesthetic stage.

As in the previous chapter, I will refer to Mary Warnock's introduction to existentialism for theoretical references. Warnock writes that in this first stage, the subject experiences unjustified feelings of freedom (7). Stoner does experience a certain freedom when he first enters the university albeit it is a negative one; he is undefined and therefore free in that respect. He has not yet realized his personal freedom and thus feels the need to satisfy the demands people have of him. He studies agriculture without any particular interest in the subject, but simply because his parents ordered him to do so. "He did his work at the University as he did his work on the farm – thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure nor distress." (John Williams*,* 7). It is something he feels obligated to do. These defining years can be seen as both his aesthetic and ethical phase, in which he experiences an unwanted freedom that shows itself in an identity crisis and allows others to set the course his life is to take. Stoner realizes that in literature, unlike any of his science courses, the "scientific myth" cannot take hold. This myth proclaims "that everything is causally determined, and that therefore in principle a complete and objectively true account of the behavior of everything could be provided, if only we took trouble and observed enough" (Mary Warnock, 8). Literature requires interpretation rather than mere observation. It is difficult to predict where a book will lead you when you open it for the first time. Scientific processes on the other hand, have a predictable outcome.

Kreider recognized literature as Stoner's religion and the novel hints at this as well. Stoner's religion is a subjective decision based on no reasoning or theory, but rather, on an act of faith. The way in which we are told about Stoner's sudden new interest highlights that his decision to change his curriculum was an impulsive one. "In the second semester of that school year William Stoner dropped his basic science courses and interrupted his Ag School sequence; he took introductory courses in philosophy and ancient history and two courses in English

literature" (13). Through this decision Stoner, defines himself and for the first time in his life, he becomes aware of his own existence. "He became conscious of himself in a way that he had not done before. Sometimes he looked at himself in a mirror…and he wondered if he appeared as ludicrous to others as he did to himself" (13). Once he discovers his true love and his vocation, Stoner is lifted out of his apathy and new life flows through him. *Stoner* emphasizes the presence of love as essential in discovering the essence of a person's life. McElroy writes about mankind that "in his service and his love for others, and in their love for him, he [man] can escape the anxiety of his existence as an isolated and insignificant being – in other words, he has some chance for happiness" (18). Love is an important force and has the potential to dominate one's life, as Stoner's love of literature did with his. The introduction to *Stoner* contains an excerpt from an interview with Williams himself in which he states that "the important thing in the novel to me is Stoner's sense of a *job.* Teaching to him is a job – a job in the good and honourable sense of the word. His job gave him a particular kind of identity and made him what he was … It's the love of the thing that's essential. And if you love something, you're going to understand it" (xiv). Stoner feels a deep love towards his field of study, and in it he can lose himself and forget the problems brought upon him from the outside world, whether it is his wife or a co-worker. It is his love for literature which defines him as a human being and adds meaning to his life when he is faced with the inevitability of his own death.

Butcher's Crossing hinted that subjective decisions are necessary if one wants to reach the religious stage. *Stoner,* however, shows that when you reach this stage, you are not guaranteed a life without problems and distress. Stoner is subjected to acts of cruelty by a number of people, all of whom play an important role in his life. This however, is all forgotten in the culmination of the novel. Eventually Stoner is content and at ease with his life because he

had a great love, which provided him with a job and a set of principles to live by. This love gave his life authenticity because the choice to study literature was his and was ultimately made out of free will. McElroy discusses Robert Browning's *A Death in the Desert,* in which "Browning recognizes that no man can live authentically as a man until he decides what kind of person he is meant to be" (41). Stoner's personality is shaped according to the principles of his love and the materialization of this love, the physical proof of his authenticity, is his own book which he holds in his hands as his last breath leaves him.

4.6 Conclusion

Unlike in *Butcher's Crossing, Stoner* gives you the entire span of a man's life with all its ups but mainly downs. Williams once again shows his knowledge of the history and conventions of a genre by writing an academic novel that is impossible to pigeonhole. *Stoner* fits in the academic novel tradition but seems to span all its subdivisions that were created over time, depending on contemporary tastes. The novel deals with sex, marriage and adultery but also with mid-life crisis and a professor deeply devoted to his profession. As with its predecessor, an existentialist undertone which runs through the story, can be seen as the catalyst which caused this innovative use of generic characteristics. The existentialist thread here however works differently than in *Butcher's Crossing*. *Stoner* expresses hope while *Butcher's Crossing* sends out a much harsher message, albeit with a potential silver lining at the very end. *Stoner* shows that simple, immaterial, aspects of life can bring about a certain happiness by providing you with a sense of direction. Stoner's unwavering love for literature, which was identified as a subjective religion, ensures that at the end of his life a feeling of contentment falls over him which confirms his identity and gives meaning to his existence. Williams's next novel, *Augustus,* cements this feeling as crucial to each individual when his life ends.

5 Augustus

5.1 Introduction

Augustus is Williams' third and final novel. It was published in 1971 and won half of the National Book Award in 1973, but nevertheless, like its predecessors, never became a huge commercial success. *Augustus* is the most ambitious novel of all, first of all because it is without a doubt the hardest one to have written. The liberties Williams had when writing *Butcher's Crossing* and *Stoner* were much bigger than when he wrote *Augustus.* Unlike the protagonists from his earlier novels, Augustus is not a fictional character. He is a mythical character, meaning that there are certain aspects of personality attributed to him that may or may not be true; was he a just ruler or a tyrant? A murderer or a pacifier? Answers to these questions are now lost to time and we are left to rely on accounts that paint different pictures of this historical character. Williams, thus had some liberties, but was still bound to a certain characterization of Augustus, provided in those different accounts. Also, the events in which this personage could be placed could not be selected arbitrarily if the novel wanted to come across as accurate. Williams was therefore much more limited in his writing, but he seemed to see this as a challenge, rather than as an obstacle.

After reading Williams's first two novels, I started to pay special attention to those lines or scenes in the book that would reflect an existential undertone, as was present in the previous ones. This novel however, seems to distance itself a little from its predecessors by keeping influences from existentialism largely at bay. They are, however, still present, and although they are so less abundantly, they still have a large influence on the plot. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the genre of the epistolary novel, in which Williams wrote the book. I will link this genre to the content of the novel and by referring to the origins of this generic tradition name it as the

best possible option to write this kind of novel in. Unlike the other two chapters, I will not try and prove how the existentialist undertone affected the genre in which Williams wrote. The epistolary novel is defined by the texts that make up the novel, they simply have to be written in the form of a letter. Nevertheless, there are existentialist influences, which I will identify and they are closely linked to the books two most tragic figures: Julia, Augustus' daughter, and Augustus himself. At the end of this chapter, I will hope to have proven the relevance of existentialism in the entirety of John Williams' novels.

5.2 Plot Summary

It should come as no surprise that the main storyline in the novel is the life and the achievements of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. The novel is divided into three parts, each commenting on a different phase in the life of Rome's most famous ruler. The first part discusses Augustus his rise to fame from the day that he was still known as Gaius Octavius. The novel commences with Octavius receiving the announcement that his uncle, Julius Caesar, had been killed. In this moment, Octavius seems to be defined by his actions. He is still a teenager at the time but the death of Caesar places him at a crossroads. Does he follow the path of his uncle, avenge him and walk into his footsteps or does he forsake a life in the spotlights and the dangers it accompanies for a careless existence in the shadows. We are all aware of Octavius' decision and in what remains of the novel its first part, we are shown how he gradually gained more and more power and the swift, and more than often cruel, ways in which he takes care of his enemies. Upon his arrival in Rome he demands a position with authority and subsequently becomes a member of the Second Triumvirate. The largest obstacle in his ascend to sole authority was defeating the plotting assassins who had killed his guardian and afterwards to overcome the other men who were also part the triumvirate: Marcus Antonius and Marcus Lepidus. After defeating these men

and the senator-turned-pirate, Pompeius, Augustus is able to call himself one of the most powerful men in the world.

The second part of the novel thus begins at the height of Augustus' power and shows how, through a series of dense plots and other treachery, the authority of Augustus is undermined. An important role in this second part is attributed to the daughter of Augustus: Julia. Early on we learn that for some reason she has been exiled by her own father. In the second part of the novel the reasoning behind this harsh act is explained. Although she had a happy childhood and an exceptional upbringing for a girl in that age, Julia is still portrayed as a tragic figure. As daughter of the emperor, her function is not much more than a means to create allies through marriage. In what seems as an act to stand out in a male dominated world she turns into a promiscuous woman, maintaining many lovers and even becoming a kind of goddess in a religious cult based on sexual intercourse. Augustus however, in an attempt to satisfy the old nobility, has installed laws which gravely condemn adultery. He manages to shield his daughter from his own laws for a short time, but when it comes to light that many of Julia's lovers are plotting to overthrow Augustus he is forced to take action against his own offspring. Forcing his own daughter into exile is apparently the hardest thing Augustus ever had to do and it determines his depressed state of mind in the final years of his life.

The third and final part of the book is also the shortest and from an existential point of view, the most important. It is the first and only time we get words that directly come from Augustus himself. We are presented with the deepest thoughts and troubles felt by Augustus, not only at the time but also at certain critical past moments, like for example when he learns about the death of Caesar or when he had to expel his own daughter. In a way that seems to resemble how *Stoner* reflected upon his existence, Augustus, too, feels the need to come to a meaningful

conclusion on his life although he is aware how entirely void of meaning it all was. He already knows that his achievements as a man of politics are only temporary and he struggles to justify the treatment of his own daughter against this realization. At the last moment however, Augustus, like Stoner, reaches a strikingly similar conclusion.

5.3 The Epistolary Tradition Meets John Williams

The epistolary novel is defined by its form, the content is rather arbitrary. To call it a genre might be a bit misplaced since a genre, in my opinion, is defined by its setting, predominant themes or characters expected to be present. For the western and the academic novel setting and the characters that are most common in that setting are essential to qualifying the novels as such. The content material that is accessible is therefore limited. The epistolary novel does not suffer from this limitation. It can house everything as long as certain requirements pertaining the form, are being respected. The novel should be divided into parts and these parts should be identifiable as letters. Letters are short narratives meant for a specific person or group of people who are usually directly addressed. The reason to present the narrative as a collection of letters is the emphasize distance. In *Epistolary Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature,* Hodkinson and Rosenmeyer write that: “Epistolary communication is justified by the separation of the writer from the receiver; on writes because one cannot speak” (11). This happens to be also one of the most attractive characteristics of the entire narrative for the readers. Hodkinson and Rosenmeyer note that: “a large part of the form’s appeal is the stage-managed eavesdropping by the external reader on a private, often highly personal conversation between the internal writer and reader, and the implicit pleasure of ‘discovering’ their secret lives” (14).

This effect of distance and absence the letters create is essential to *Augustus.* The letters in the book supposedly stem from a different time period. Even though Williams clearly states in

the beginning that the largest part of the letters are fictitious, they are presented as actual historical documentation. Before a letter commences, we are presented with the writer, the addressee, the year of writing and, if relevant, the name of the larger source containing the letter presented. This fits in Williams' attempts to pursue a high degree of realism in his work. In *Butcher's Crossing* he achieved this through very detailed explanations of the skinning of a buffalo, in *Augustus* the realism is achieved by creating distance. There is nobody telling us the story, the "narrators", the writers of the letters, are not narrating to us, readers, but to the addressee. We get the feeling that we, as readers, are given authentic historical materials and are just partaking in historical research. Williams also adds actual historical material, although he also mediated this, to heighten the sense of realism. He adds parts of letters from Cicero, excerpts from *The Deeds of the Divine Augustus* written by the emperor himself and some content from Livy's *History* (Williams, Author's note). The presence of an easily identifiable narrator who presents the events to us as they happen, creates the feeling that he is a mediator, someone making these events accessible for us through time and we are left to question this narrator's credibility, *Augustus* does not have that problem. Thomas O. Beebee discussed the epistolary genre in his book *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* and he notes that "like our own lives, epistolary fictions contain no narrator…" (8). Beebee further on links this absence of a narrator to its tendency to obtain a high degree of realism "the genre's prevalence in the eighteenth century still locates the power of the letter in its verisimilitude, its ability to mimic and reflect reality. The different discursive practices in which letters participate are subsumed under a general purpose of portraying "real life" (14). Williams tries to create this distance and heighten its level of realism because this ensures readers to actively engage with the text, to come to conclusions about its value for themselves.

Another aspect which heightens the level of realism is the content material letters can house. They tend to be really personal, providing an in-depth look at someone's deepest thoughts and concerns. Creating these letters as fictional accounts, provides the writer of such narratives with certain possibilities. Hodkinson and Rosenmeyer write that "the pseudonymous author can thereby 'reveal' to the external reader things which canonical writings by the historical author do not" (7). The fact that Williams writes fiction, gives him much more freedom and allows him to manipulate historical events and characters for the sake of the overall story. We forgive, and forget, any historical inaccuracies because we are so engaged in the story and familiarize with these characters, we recognize our own problems in theirs. In *Ancient Epistolary Fictions* Patricia Rosenmeyer writes that "the epistolary genre implies a focus on the inner life of the "hero," and the reader is then invited to identify with the *ego* of the letter" (197). This once again comes down to making the reading experience feel as authentic as possible for the reader.

Augustus contains little generic innovativeness and does not show a break with tradition. This chapter will not discuss how the existential influences adapted the genre because the genre in itself is pretty straightforward, not very much adaptable at all. Still, critics seem to marvel at the brilliance of the work not because it is different than other epistolary novel, but simply because it is an epistolary novel. In a review, William Giraldi writes: "The sheer ambition of the thing. The book is a miracle: it shouldn't work, no way it should work - an epistolary novel about Rome's first emperor, told in the ancient yet natural and varied voices of all the key players? — and yet it succeeds beyond all measure" (Girladi). Dan Piepenbring mentions that "there are so many things about John Williams's Augustus … that shouldn't work. First, it's an epistolary novel—a form that always stretches credibility, by my lights, because to advance the plot its letters must make long forays into exposition, and real letters seldom do … And yet

Augustus is gripping, brimming with life" (Piepenbring). It is my opinion that in this novel Williams wanted to showcase his talent as writer. He is innovative in the way that the writes in a literary tradition that seems highly outdated. The works I consulted on the genre all discuss the epistolary novel in Ancient Greece and Rome or discuss the faded glory of the novel in Europe as it was popular up until two centuries ago, an example is Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Williams' innovativeness derives from his attempts to obtain a high sense of realism. The epistolary tradition was popular in ancient Rome so to be as credible as possible Williams decided to write in the dominant contemporary writing style. Williams's final book, unsurprisingly, is also affected by the implementation of an existentialist undertone. It might even have been this undertone which made the novel strive for a heightened sense of realism.

5.4 Existentialism in *Augustus*

John McGahern wrote the introduction to the new issue of *Augustus.* In it he recalls what appears to have been the motivation for Williams to start writing. Williams appeared to have a friend, Morton Hunt, who was writing a book on the conception of love over time. "Hunt told him the story of Augustus, who had a daughter, Julia, whom he loved, but he exiled and imprisoned her in order to save the State because she had broken the laws on adultery that he had enacted. This fascinated Williams and he started to read about it. Discovering that Julia had been effectively written out of the histories, the more he read the more he was engaged by what he describes as 'the ambivalence between the public necessity and the private want or need' which is at the novel's core" (Williams, X). This already hints at some existential influences; the internal battle between duty and personal aspirations and the way this influences your personality. But the references to existential theory are sparse in this novel, until the final section of the book they even seem absent. The second section of the novel contains, fictional, parts of a lost journal of

Julia, the daughter of Augustus. Her faith seemed to be one of the main interests for Williams, but only as to what it might have brought about internally in Augustus. Daniel Mendelsohn wrote a review on *Augustus* in which he states that “Part I is about success in the public, political sphere, and Part II about failure in the private, emotional sphere—the latter being a potential cost, Williams suggests, of the former” (Mendelsohn). Mendelsohn does not mention the third part, which makes up the existential conclusion to the novel.

I will only discuss the third and final part of the novel. This is the only time our main character gets voiced directly and thus also the first time we get a clear view on his mindset and personality without it being mediated through an eye witness. In this final chapter, Williams seems to connect his novel to the ones he wrote before. Mendelsohn noticed that “the surprise of his final novel is that its famous protagonist turns out to be no different in the end from this author’s other disappointed heroes; which is to say, neither better nor worse than most of us. The concerns of this spectacular historical saga are intimate and deeply humane” (Mendelsohn). He also notes that “the surprise of his final novel is that its famous protagonist turns out to be no different in the end from this author’s other disappointed heroes; which is to say, neither better nor worse than most of us. The concerns of this spectacular historical saga are intimate and deeply humane” (Mendelsohn). The novel goes to show that no matter who you are, at the end of your live there will come a moment that you are confronted with your past and present self and it is in this defining moment that you will have to make some sense of your life or die in a state of relative despair. Because to die without identity, means not to have lived at all.

In *Augustus* there is little reliance on the existentialist theory of Kierkegaard, although the novel acknowledges it when Augustus is describing fleshly love: “To that instant of pleasure some dedicate all their lives, and become embittered and empty when the body fails, as the body must.

They are embittered and empty because they have known only the pleasure, and do not know what that pleasure has meant" (Williams, 304). Our protagonist refers to the aesthetic phase here and condemns it as superficial, making love for the sake of bodily pleasure. A further discussion of the phases might be useless. The second stage is the ethical phase, in which the individual conforms to the rules of society. For Augustus, his evolution within the phases ends here. He is the emperor and therefore the embodiment of the society he inhabits. His conformation to his own rules is essential for him to be a just and righteous ruler. Augustus himself realizes this when he discusses the faith of his daughter, whom he sent into exile:

> "… but will live out her life in the belief that she [Julia] was the victim of a passion which led to her disgrace, rather than a participant in a conspiracy that would certainly have led to her father's death, and almost certainly would have destroyed Rome. The first thing I might have allowed; the second I could not" (Williams, 307).

Augustus himself seems to be aware of his fixture in this stage. He seems familiar with the final stage as well though when he refers to it as a distant possibility: "I have in late years sometimes thought that it might be possible to construct a system of theology or even a religion around the idea of love, if that idea were extended somewhat beyond its usual application, and approached in a certain way" (John Williams, 303-4).

The conclusion reached by Augustus, resembles the one by Stoner when he is laying on his deathbed. "The despair that I have voiced seems to me now unworthy of what I have done. Rome is not eternal; it does not matter. Rome will fall; it does not matter. The barbarian will conquer; it does not matter. There was a moment of Rome, and it will not wholly die; the barbarian will become the Rome he conquers; the language will smooth his rough tongue; the

vision of what he destroys will flow in his blood. And in time that is ceaseless as this salt sea upon which I am so frailly suspended, the cost is nothing, less than nothing" (Williams, 310). This realization is of vital importance as it is the last one Augustus has in the novel. He is able to place himself in the continuum of time and see that what he built might only be temporary, but the effect of the echo of his creation will resound throughout time. The "it does not matter" which is repeated several times, resembles the "what did you expect" which echoes through Stoner in his final moments. In both cases, the protagonists try to be realistic about their own existence. They both seem to accept who they are and have been over the course of their lives. Stoner does so when he reaches out for his own book, while Augustus reaches this stage when he meets some Egyptian Romans who are merchants:

> "You have given us the liberty to sail the seas and thus furnish Rome with the bountiful goods of Egypt; you have rid the seas of those pirates and brigands that in the past would have made that liberty empty. Thus the Egyptian Roman may prosper, and may return to his homeland secure in the knowledge that only the accidents of wind and wave threaten his safety. For all this we give thanks to you, and pray that the gods will allow you good fortune for the rest of your days" (John Williams, 309).

The love and respect he feels from these men make him realize something: "I can persuade myself now that after all there has been some symmetry to my life, some point; and that my existence has been of more benefit than harm to this world that I am content to leave" (Williams, 310).

This kind of confession has a certain effect on readers. We are lead to believe that these question which surround our existence and our condition on this planet have been around for

centuries, maybe even for as long as the conscious human being. No matter how rich or famous or powerful, you do not escape the feelings of insecurity that will surround your presence. Even the most important figures in history, those who helped shape the world as we know it, struggled to add meaning to their personal identity and are therefore not much different than us. Mendelsohn shares this idea and calls this the one truth of the novel: "To confront one's self, stripped of pretense and illusion, is the climax to which every life inevitably leads, however great or humble" (Mendelsohn).

5.5 Conclusion

If there would be one of Williams' novels that stands out it would be *Augustus.* The novel does not deviate from generic conventions since there are very little conventions to take into account. The epistolary novel is more stylistically defined, since the novel its contents must be presented in the shape of letters or other correspondence. Another requirement seems to be the absence of an overarching narrator, more important is that the reader has the feeling that he is witnessing the most personal thoughts and feelings from the characters he is following. I defined the reader of epistolary fiction as an eavesdropper over personal conversations.

This technique allowed Williams to go into depth in his character descriptions. He could present personal feelings and thoughts in a realistic. Leaving the presentation of these descriptions to a narrator, takes away from the realism. Once again, a high degree of realism is pursued in order for the readers to relate to the characters. This is necessary for the readers in order to see the conclusions, reached by the protagonists at the close of each novel, as valuable for personal introspection. These conclusions are an effect caused by the existentialist undertone that is present in each of the novels. This undertone can be found in *Augustus* as well, but only in the final part of the story. The influences from existentialism are saved to be voiced through the

emperor himself and it is he, surprisingly, who struggles to attach meaning to his identity. At the end of the story, this quest is once again cited as critical if one does not want to die disillusioned and disappointed in life and himself.

6 Posthumous Popularity

My personal love for Williams' work started when I was about fifty pages into Stoner. When I finished reading there was little doubt in my mind that it was one of the best books I had ever read so far and I could not help but wonder why this book remained relatively unknown until a few years ago. A similar case can be made for its author. Williams gained fame briefly when he received the 1973 National Book Award for his epistolary novel Augustus. But even when he was given credit for his work, he was still slighted. Previous awards were only attributed to one writer, while the 1973 award had to be shared between Williams and John Barth. Williams would never witness the status his novels would reach since he died in 1994. When Anna Gavalda, a French writer, got her hands on a republished version of Stoner she felt the need to translate the work in French and from there on, the book became a bestseller across Europe. The question remains as to where this sudden rise in popularity comes from. Even at the peak of its hype, Stoner sold more copies in Europe than in the United States but ascribing it simply to a difference in culture seems like an easy way to deal with the "mystery" clouding the work of Williams.

One of the reasons for its increasing popularity might be what I have been discussing extensively so far, which is that none of Williams's novels can be defined by the genre they supposedly belong to. In his review on Stoner, Julian Barnes notes the following: "Butcher's Crossing is a very good "western", as Stoner is a very good "academic novel" – and, in each case, being "very good" means that the novels slip their identifying tag" (Barnes). Williams' novels create the illusion for the reader that he is "simply" reading an academic novel or a western novel, but actually so much more is being told implicitly, content material that is highly valuable to the story but might seem a bit out of place generically. It leaves readers wondering if

they really just finished reading a novel in that specific genre they assumed they were reading in. Through its generic tag we get certain expectations but when those expectations are not only fulfilled but transcended as well and we are left with a very valuable reading experience.

This explanation does not seem sufficient when attempting to describe Williams' sudden popularity. Readers might appreciate how the novels stray from tradition but I doubt that is enough for a novel to become a bestseller in several European countries and even Israel and China. The book affects people in a certain way since we recognize ourselves in his fictional characters and share the worries that cloud their existence. Brett Easton Ellis wrote a review on Butcher's Crossing and Williams's work in general, in which he tries to define the connection we automatically seem to make with Stoner: "The book simply, powerfully, catalogues the disappointments that make up a life, which makes it sound depressing, but it isn't, because we identify with Stoner, and his failures are our failures. It is clear-eyed in its compassion and, though you may be weeping at the end, it's a very consoling book, because it says we aren't alone in our suffering – everyone suffers" (Ellis). Through his fiction, Williams discusses an inherent human feeling concerning our human condition. That is why Williams' protagonists are so interesting, why people feel so drawn to them. In *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction,* Robert Eaglestone writes something which is very fitting to the work of John Williams. He says that "in an age in which the risk is the simple disposableness of human beings as human beings, these larger tasks may be too much to accomplish. Instead, the novel … is perhaps one of very, very few indispensable markers of what it is just to be alive and human today. Just by telling its story, making something intelligible against this backdrop of human redundancy, a novel is a tiny but concrete resistance to the global and profound trends that threaten to make humans superfluous … This process of making things intelligible and the

characteristic of spontaneity come together in the special form of attention that the novel can create" (62-63). This is a comment on contemporary fiction, this little survey was written in 2013. This immediately shows Williams' innovativeness and why people now start to discover his literature. They discover truth in it. Steve Almond writes: "I had never encountered a work so ruthless in its devotion to human truths and so tender in its execution" (Almond). The sad truths reached by William Stoner and Augustus are not violently thrown in our face but gently communicated to us over the course of the story. Readers can familiarize with Stoner's , Andrews' or Augustus' feelings of isolation and sadness, which is also recognized by Barnes: "The sadness of Stoner is of its own particular kind … It feels a purer, less literary kind, closer to life's true sadness. As a reader, you can see it coming in the way you can often see life's sadness coming, knowing there is little you can do about it…" (Barnes). None of the discussed novels are fully pessimistic. We recognize the pain felt by the men but also share their relief when they find something seemingly valuable. Williams' novels paint a clear picture of life which is also what Tim Kreider noticed in his review on Stoner: "Part of "Stoner" 's greatness is that it sees life whole and as it is, without delusion yet without despair" (Kreider). This full scope on life installs the feeling that you are reading the work of someone who seems to be better informed about the true essence of life. Kreider describes it as "something in even those first paragraphs, an un-show-off-y assurance in the prose, like the soft opening notes of a virtuoso or the first casual gestures of a master artist, that tells us we are in the presence not just of a great writer but of something more—someone who knows life, who maybe even understands it" (Kreider).

Through his novels Williams succeeds in showing that our everyday goals mean nothing if we do not attempt to define ourselves first. These goals are mainly selfish and usually void of any existential relevance. Almond is able to place his finger on what exactly makes us marvel at

Williams' work, two decades after his death: "I am no doubt overstating the case, as fanatics do, but I find it tremendously hopeful that "Stoner" is thriving in a world in which capitalist energies are so hellbent on distracting us from the necessary anguish of our inner lives. "Stoner" argues that we are measured ultimately by our capacity to face the truth of who we are in private moments, not by the burnishing of our public selves. It is, in other words, a searing condemnation of our current cultural moment" (Almond). Through social media and other contemporary communication systems we are set on providing the outside world with an image of ourselves that is exclusively positive. We are living in a world, especially here in Western Europe, in which possibilities are endless. We are so scared to look like a failure in the eyes of the outside world that all our energy is focused towards succeeding in the capitalist system and making the best of the possibilities provided. Andrews, Stoner and Augustus are all men who solely look inwards when they attribute meaning to their existence or at least attempt to do so. In a time when people look outside for confirmation, novels with an existentialist undertone like those written by Williams, show us that at the end of your life, no matter if you are the emperor of Rome or an English teacher, it is yourself you have to convince about its relevance. Nobody will help you reach that conclusion on your death bed, nobody but yourself is able to. This sudden resurgence of the work of John Williams might indicate that people seem to agree with the take on life that is professed in the novels.

7 Conclusion

I can conclude by saying that the influences of existentialism are heavily noticeable in the work of John Williams and probably influenced the course his novels took. All three of his main characters are troubled men who seem to uphold ideas that are closely related to the philosophical movement of existentialism. They all actively engage with existentialist influences and obtain some valuable life lessons out of it, for Stoner and Augustus, it even is their final and most valuable realization. In order to make these philosophical influences somewhat obvious, the novels stand out against the traditional novels that make up one single genre. Readers notice these peculiarities and are left to consider this discrepancy between the expectations they had before and questions that remain at the end of the novel. Their reading experience, in that genre, was probably unprecedented. In the final chapter I identified this innovativeness as one of the potential reasons as to why Williams' novels became so popular these last few years.

All three novels eventually reach a similar conclusion. Our individual lives are valuable, but it is up to ourselves to provide them with value and the value you will identify or hope to identify is highly personal. Williams' novels seem to stress love as important to reach this ideal. In *Stoner* it is the love for literature and teaching that at the end of his life provides him with a sense of satisfaction since this love has defined him as a person and gave him an identity on the university campus, although he lived through many heartbreaking experiences that could have crumbled his identity. In *Augustus* love is also the strongest force. The love Augustus feels for his daughter and his city dominates his existence. But here, love is also identified as something that can tear a person apart. Augustus is left to choose between the two things he holds dearest in life and this makes him eventually question who he really was. Was alienating his daughter worth temporal stability in the empire? It is in the face of such doubts that it is most important to

come to identify, and come to terms with your true unalterable self. If you can accept who you have been, if you can identify a never wavering interest and passion your life has been valuable, if only to yourself.

Williams deserves a more prominent place in the literary canon, if only for his generic innovativeness. He proved his skill as a writer by adopting a different genre for each of his novels and showed how similar conclusions can be reached in different time eras and in different settings. These conclusions are therefore universal and inherently common to any man or woman. The fact that more and more people seem to find their way to his fiction, seems to indicate that people seem to relate to what is being told in the different novels. This goes to show the timelessness of the novels from John Williams.

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