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# **STONER**

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
John McGahern

**VINTAGE CLASSICS**

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: 'Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues.'

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers.

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He was born in 1891 on a small farm in central Missouri near the village of Booneville, some forty miles from Columbia, the home of the University. Though his parents were young at the time of his birth—his father twenty-five, his mother barely twenty—Stoner thought of them, even when he was a boy, as old. At thirty his father looked fifty; stooped by labor, he gazed without hope at the arid patch of land that sustained the family from one year to the next. His mother regarded her life patiently, as if it were a long moment that she had to endure. Her eyes were pale and blurred, and the tiny wrinkles around them were enhanced by thin graying hair worn straight over her head and caught in a bun at the back.

From the earliest time he could remember, William Stoner had his duties. At the age of six he milked the bony cows, slopped the pigs in the sty a few yards from the house, and gathered small eggs from a flock of spindly chickens. And even when he started attending the rural school eight miles from the farm, his day, from before dawn until after dark, was filled with work of one sort or another. At seventeen his shoulders were already beginning to stoop beneath the weight of his occupation.

It was a lonely household, of which he was an only child, and it was bound together by the necessity of its toil. In the evenings the three of them sat in the small kitchen lighted by a single kerosene lamp, staring into the yellow flame; often during the hour or so between supper and bed, the only sound that could be heard was the weary movement of a body in a straight chair and the soft creak of a timber giving a little beneath the age of the house.

The house was built in a crude square, and the unpainted timbers sagged around the porch and doors. It had with the years taken on the colors of the dry land—gray and

brown, streaked with white. On one side of the house was a long parlor, sparsely furnished with straight chairs and a few hewn tables, and a kitchen, where the family spent most of its little time together. On the other side were two bedrooms, each furnished with an iron bedstead enameled white, a single straight chair, and a table, with a lamp and a wash basin on it. The floors were of unpainted plank, unevenly spaced and cracking with age, up through which dust steadily seeped and was swept back each day by Stoner's mother.

At school he did his lessons as if they were chores only somewhat less exhausting than those around the farm. When he finished high school in the spring of 1910, he expected to take over more of the work in the fields; it seemed to him that his father grew slower and more weary with the passing months.

But one evening in late spring, after the two men had spent a full day hoeing corn, his father spoke to him in the kitchen, after the supper dishes had been cleared away.

'County agent come by last week.'

William looked up from the red-and-white-checked oilcloth spread smoothly over the round kitchen table. He did not speak.

'Says they have a new school at the University in Columbia. They call it a College of Agriculture. Says he thinks you ought to go. It takes four years.'

'Four years,' William said. 'Does it cost money?'

'You could work your room and board,' his father said. 'Your ma has a first cousin owns a place just outside Columbia. There would be books and things. I could send you two or three dollars a month.'

William spread his hands on the tablecloth, which gleamed dully under the lamplight. He had never been farther from

home than Booneville, fifteen miles away. He swallowed to steady his voice.

'Think you could manage the place all by yourself?' he asked.

'Your ma and me could manage. I'd plant the upper twenty in wheat; that would cut down the hand work.'

William looked at his mother. 'Ma?' he asked.

She said tonelessly, 'You do what your pa says.'

'You really want me to go?' he asked, as if he half hoped for a denial. 'You really want me to?'

His father shifted his weight on the chair. He looked at his thick, callused fingers, into the cracks of which soil had penetrated so deeply that it could not be washed away. He laced his fingers together and held them up from the table, almost in an attitude of prayer.

'I never had no schooling to speak of,' he said, looking at his hands. 'I started working a farm when I finished sixth grade. Never held with schooling when I was a young 'un. But now I don't know. Seems like the land gets drier and harder to work every year; it ain't rich like it was when I was a boy. County agent says they got new ideas, ways of doing things they teach you at the University. Maybe he's right. Sometimes when I'm working the field I get to thinking.' He paused. His fingers tightened upon themselves, and his clasped hands dropped to the table. 'I get to thinking—' He scowled at his hands and shook his head. 'You go on to the University come fall. Your ma and me will manage.'

It was the longest speech he had ever heard his father make. That fall he went to Columbia and enrolled in the University as a freshman in the College of Agriculture.

He came to Columbia with a new black broadcloth suit ordered from the catalogue of Sears & Roebuck and paid

for with his mother's egg money, a worn greatcoat that had belonged to his father, a pair of blue serge trousers that once a month he had worn to the Methodist church in Booneville, two white shirts, two changes of work clothing, and twenty-five dollars in cash, which his father had borrowed from a neighbor against the fall wheat. He started walking from Booneville, where in the early morning his father and mother brought him on the farm's flat-bed, mule-drawn wagon.

It was a hot fall day, and the road from Booneville to Columbia was dusty; he had been walking for nearly an hour before a goods wagon came up beside him and the driver asked him if he wanted a ride. He nodded and got up on the wagon seat. His serge trousers were red with dust to his knees, and his sun- and wind-browned face was caked with dirt, where the road dust had mingled with his sweat. During the long ride he kept brushing at his trousers with awkward hands and running his fingers through his straight sandy hair, which would not lie flat on his head.

They got to Columbia in the late afternoon. The driver let Stoner off at the outskirts of town and pointed to a group of buildings shaded by tall elms. 'That's your University,' he said. 'That's where you'll be going to school.'

For several minutes after the man had driven off, Stoner stood unmoving, staring at the complex of buildings. He had never before seen anything so imposing. The red brick buildings stretched upward from a broad field of green that was broken by stone walks and small patches of garden. Beneath his awe, he had a sudden sense of security and serenity he had never felt before. Though it was late, he walked for many minutes about the edges of the campus, only looking, as if he had no right to enter.

It was nearly dark when he asked a passer-by directions

to Ashland Gravel, the road that would lead him to the farm owned by Jim Foote, the first cousin of his mother for whom he was to work; and it was after dark when he got to the white two-storied frame house where he was to live. He had not seen the Footes before, and he felt strange going to them so late.

They greeted him with a nod, inspecting him closely. After a moment, during which Stoner stood awkwardly in the door-way, Jim Foote motioned him into a small dim parlor crowded with overstuffed furniture and bric-a-brac on dully gleaming tables. He did not sit.

'Et supper?' Foote asked.

'No, sir,' Stoner answered.

Mrs Foote crooked an index finger at him and padded away. Stoner followed her through several rooms into a kitchen, where she motioned him to sit at a table. She put a pitcher of milk and several squares of cold cornbread before him. He sipped the milk, but his mouth, dry from excitement, would not take the bread.

Foote came into the room and stood beside his wife. He was a small man, not more than five feet three inches, with a lean face and a sharp nose. His wife was four inches taller, and heavy; rimless spectacles hid her eyes, and her thin lips were tight. The two of them watched hungrily as he sipped his milk.

'Feed and water the livestock, slop the pigs in the morning,' Foote said rapidly.

Stoner looked at him blankly. 'What?'

'That's what you do in the morning,' Foote said, 'before you leave for your school. Then in the evening you feed and slop again, gather the eggs, milk the cows. Chop firewood when you find time. Weekends, you help me with whatever I'm doing.'

'Yes, sir,' Stoner said.

Foote studied him for a moment. 'College,' he said and shook his head.

So for nine months' room and board he fed and watered the livestock, slopped pigs, gathered eggs, milked cows, and chopped firewood. He also plowed and harrowed fields, dug stumps (in the winter breaking through three inches of frozen soil), and churned butter for Mrs Foote, who watched him with her head bobbing in grim approval as the wooden churner splashed up and down through the milk.

He was quartered on an upper floor that had once been a storeroom; his only furniture was a black iron bedstead with sagging frames that supported a thin feather mattress, a broken table that held a kerosene lamp, a straight chair that sat unevenly on the floor, and a large box that he used as a desk. In the winter the only heat he got seeped up through the floor from the rooms below; he wrapped himself in the tattered quilts and blankets allowed him and blew on his hands so that they could turn the pages of his books without tearing them.

He did his work at the University as he did his work on the farm—thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure nor distress. 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 no higher. He was aware that he had learned things that he had not known before, but this meant to him only that he might do as well in his second year as he had done in his first.

The summer after his first year of college he returned to his father's farm and helped with the crops. Once his father asked him how he liked school, and he replied that he liked it fine. His father nodded and did not mention the matter again.

It was not until he returned for his second year that William Stoner learned why he had come to college.

By his second year he was a familiar figure on the campus. In every season he wore the same black broadcloth suit, white shirt, and string tie; his wrists protruded from the sleeves of the jacket, and the trousers rode awkwardly about his legs, as if it were a uniform that had once belonged to someone else.

His hours of work increased with his employers' growing indolence, and he spent the long evenings in his room methodically doing his class assignments; he had begun the sequence that would lead him to a Bachelor of Science degree in the College of Agriculture, and during this first semester of his second year he had two basic sciences, a course from the school of Agriculture in soil chemistry, and a course that was rather perfunctorily required of all University students—a semester survey of English literature.

After the first few weeks he had little difficulty with the science courses; there was so much work to be done, so many things to be remembered. The course in soil chemistry caught his interest in a general way; it had not occurred to him that the brownish clods with which he had worked for most of his life were anything other than what they appeared to be, and he began vaguely to see that his growing knowledge of them might be useful when he returned to his father's farm. But the required survey of English literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before.

The instructor was a man of middle age, in his early fifties; his name was Archer Sloane, and he came to his task of teaching with a seeming disdain and contempt, as if he perceived between his knowledge and what he could say a

gulf so profound that he would make no effort to close it. He was feared and disliked by most of his students, and he responded with a detached, ironic amusement. He was a man of middle height, with a long, deeply lined face, cleanly shaven; he had an impatient gesture of running his fingers through the shock of his gray curling hair. His voice was flat and dry, and it came through barely moving lips without expression or intonation; but his long thin fingers moved with grace and persuasion, as if giving to the words a shape that his voice could not.

Away from the classroom, doing his chores about the farm or blinking against the dim lamplight as he studied in his windowless attic room, Stoner was often aware that the image of this man had risen up before the eye of his mind. He had difficulty summoning up the face of any other of his instructors or remembering anything very specific about any other of his classes; but always on the threshold of his awareness waited the figure of Archer Sloane, and his dry voice, and his contemptuously offhand words about some passage from *Beowulf*, or some couplet of Chaucer's.

He found that he could not handle the survey as he did his other courses. Though he remembered the authors and their works and their dates and their influences, he nearly failed his first examination; and he did little better on his second. He read and reread his literature assignments so frequently that his work in other courses began to suffer; and still the words he read were words on pages, and he could not see the use of what he did.

And he pondered the words that Archer Sloane spoke in class, as if beneath their flat, dry meaning he might discover a clue that would lead him where he was intended to go; he hunched forward over the desk-top of a chair too small to hold him comfortably, grasping the edges of the desk-top

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so tightly that his knuckles showed white against his brown hard skin; he frowned intently and gnawed at his underlip. But as Stoner's and his classmates' attention grew more desperate, Archer Sloane's contempt grew more compelling. And once that contempt erupted into anger and was directed at William Stoner alone.

The class had read two plays by Shakespeare and was ending the week with a study of the sonnets. The students were edgy and puzzled, half frightened at the tension growing between themselves and the slouching figure that regarded them from behind the lectern. Sloane had read aloud to them the seventy-third sonnet; his eyes roved about the room and his lips tightened in a humorless smile.

'What does the sonnet mean?' he asked abruptly, and paused, his eyes searching the room with a grim and almost pleased hopelessness. 'Mr Wilbur?' There was no answer. 'Mr Schmidt?' Someone coughed. Sloane turned his dark bright eyes upon Stoner. 'Mr Stoner, what does the sonnet mean?'

Stoner swallowed and tried to open his mouth.

'It is a sonnet, Mr Stoner,' Sloane said dryly, 'a poetical composition of fourteen lines, with a certain pattern I am sure you have memorized. It is written in the English language, which I believe you have been speaking for some years. Its author is William Shakespeare, a poet who is dead, but who nevertheless occupies a position of some importance in the minds of a few.' He looked at Stoner for a moment more, and then his eyes went blank as they fixed unseeingly beyond the class. Without looking at his book he spoke the poem again; and his voice deepened and softened, as if the words and sounds and rhythms had for a moment become himself:

'That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west;  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourisht by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love  
more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.'

In a moment of silence, someone cleared his throat. Sloane repeated the lines, his voice becoming flat, his own again.

'This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more  
strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.'

Sloane's eyes came back to William Stoner, and he said dryly, 'Mr Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner; do you hear him?'

William Stoner realized that for several moments he had been holding his breath. He expelled it gently, minutely aware of his clothing moving upon his body as his breath went out of his lungs. He looked away from Sloane about the room. Light slanted from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a