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# The Alienated Body in John Williams' Novel *Stoner*

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**Abstract:** The concept of alienation is a multifaceted issue which has been used to describe the state of human estrangement from society, from others and even from one's own nature. David Patterson goes further when he states that alienation becomes the norm, more than that it becomes the core of human existence. The present paper delineates bodily alienation in a host of settings, in aging, in sickness, and in death, approaching the issue from a phenomenological and philosophical point of view. At first, the phenomenon of bodily alienation depicts the physical change in the experience of aging and its effects on the protagonist. It puts into focus the alien nature of growing old, representing the body in aging as a tool and an obstacle, as it reflects upon the individual relation with others highlighting the body as a being-for others. Then, the study swirls around the changes that accompany being ill, differentiating between the lived body and body as object. As it also revolves around the objectification of the body in illness through the examination stage, the loss of mastery over the body, its dysfunction and otherness. Finally, the paper depends on Sartre's work to explore the alienated body in death, examining Stoner's alienation during his dying hours.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Body, Age, Illness, Death, Object

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## 1. Introduction

Bodily alienation has been investigated across a broad spectrum of approaches and disciplines. Some researchers define alienation as the result of physical or mental conditions, others see it as an avoidable fate "In short, to be human is to be alienated. The fact of human existence implies alienation" [1]. The attempts to well understand this notion hinges upon the works of different scholars. For example, Simone De Beauvoir's approach to aging, highlights terms such as metamorphosis, transformation and shock. While, works of writers like Sally Gadow and Kathleen Woodward on growing old, take into concern the individual's state of estrangement and loss under this experience. Coming to the second issue, this paper studies the body as other in sickness elaborating on the ideas of Jean Paul Sartre, Kay Toombs, Drew Leder, and others. These works focus on the alterations in the appearance of the body, on the painful metamorphosis, and on the body as disabled and dysfunctional. With regard to alienation in death, the present paper dwells upon but is not limited to Sartre's work. Stoner's estrangement expands to tire not only his soul but also his body. The different pressures exerted by his

entourage debilitate his body, which has "aged rapidly", and fallen sick. Stoner experiences bodily alienation, fragmenting his already fragmented self, again and again. In this article the focus is upon the body as other in the process of aging, illness and death. An analysis that does not rely on the scientific perspective, but it approaches the issue from a phenomenological and philosophical point of view.

## 2. Aging as a Form of Alienation

Like any other person, Stoner is haunted by the idea of growing old. He keeps an eye on the others' physical changes like his parents, his wife and his friend Gordon. He measures age and studies the changes between his own body and the others' bodies. When he realizes that he himself is growing old, Stoner is shocked.

In her book, *The Coming of Age*, Simone De Beauvoir describes the phenomenon of aging as "a surprise", "a revelation", "a metamorphosis" and "a crisis." All these expressions show that the event of aging happens all of a sudden, causing a radical change. Stoner is appalled by his

bodily transformations, “when he saw his face in the mirror, or when he approached his reflection in one of the glass doors that led into Jesse Hall, he recognized the changes that had come over him with a mild shock” [2]. This change comes more upon the self from the outside, as Simone De Beauvoir puts it in her book *The Coming of Age*, when she says that aging is “the insoluble contradiction between the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation” [3]. The change affects the physical appearance while the individual’s understanding of the self is of stable nature.

According to Beauvoir’s approach, aging changes one part of the self, it is “the other in me” that ages. In this context, the other is “the one that I am for others”, the outer appearance that others perceive, not my own sense of myself. By the same token, Marcel Proust and André Gide talk about “masks,” “costumes” and “disguises”. It is exactly what Stoner feels when he looks at his reflection in the mirror, he sees his “eyes clear in a grotesque mask; it was as if he wore, for an obscure reason, an outrageous disguise” [2]. The protagonist fails to identify with this new appearance, he is a stranger to his own body and “could not think of himself as old” [2]. He bears in his memories an old image of himself, and lives a state of estrangement caused by his refusal to accept the new Stoner he became. He and his body are no longer one and the same, when he looks at his image in the mirror, he feels “no identity with the face that stared back at him in surprise” [2]. This lack of identification explicates to what extent the protagonist becomes estranged from his own body.

Katheline Woodward, in *Aging and its Discontents*, gives an idea about the old person’s emotional state, explaining that the “symptoms of these feelings of apprehension are denial and repression of the very subject of aging and old age” [4]. Stoner reaches a state of disavowal of his own body which has changed in an unpleasant way. Because the body in aging deteriorates, it becomes, as Simone De Beauvoir describes it, an “immobile body,” which is the inflexible body, one that its ability to move is reduced. Moreover, the body in aging becomes also the “empty body” which is empty like a shell, powerless and lacks life, as it becomes the “fragmentary body,” when the old person starts feeling his body as separate organs not as a whole. Along all these processes the body becomes an obstacle to normal life. At the age of sixty-three, Stoner realizes that he has but four more years at the university, although he “tried to see beyond that time; he could not see, and had no wish to do so” [2]. At this stage, the protagonist admits his powerlessness and his inability to fight this monster, aging.

As it is mentioned above, in addition to his other worries and preoccupations, growing old becomes Stoner’s great fear. He wants to overcome this stage in his life and thinks “as if he could, if he wished strip away the bushy white eyebrows, the ruffled white hair, the flesh that sagged around the sharp bones, the deep lines that pretended age” [2]. He wishes to erase age marks, to cover these signs that mutate his appearance. In our relation with others and with the world we hide behind an “outer side” which is both part of us and not

part of us, because as Proust and Gide explain, we can never get rid of these masks.

About this sense of loss in aging, Sally Gadow, the American writer and professor at the University of Colorado, argues that “loss that is threatened with aging is not the sheer fact of physical decline, but the inevitable alienation from a body that is regarded as an imprisoning object” [5]. Stoner’s desires, his dreams and hopes are now confined in his weak and old body. He is overwhelmed by his limitation, even in his reverie, when he feels as if Katherine were close to him and he could touch her, “it occurred to him that he was nearly sixty years old and that he ought to be beyond the force of such passion, of such love” [2]. In addition to all the previous defects, Stoner’s body in aging becomes a source of shame, he is ashamed of his feelings and his passion.

Becoming old, Stoner no longer experiences his “lived body” with its spontaneous interaction with the world, rather, he starts sensing his body as a thing that he has to direct, for instance he “learned to slow his movements” [2]. In aging, the individual needs to rethink his abilities and skills. Growing old, the body, as Sally Gadow puts it in *What does it Mean to Grow Old?* is considered as an object that belongs to a decaying world which “can only destroy the dignity that consists in the self-remaining at the center of its experience, freely determining the nature of its relation with the body” [5]. The subject’s dignity is threatened because its bodily transformations impede the self from keeping its position in the world. By so doing, aging pushes the self on the margin of existence. The same writer goes further by saying that the host becomes an enemy. She means that the body, which contains the self, turns into a foe that hampers the progress of the subject. While the American author, Ray Bradbury, describes the body in aging as a dragon that will swallow the self. Aging is a personal metamorphosis which brings a radical change in Stoner’s way of life. It alters his relation to his body, to others and to the world. Aging affects Stoner’s realization of self and body, growing old the body becomes an object, a tool and an alien to the self.

### 3. The Body as Other in Illness

During his illness, Stoner is estranged from his body. Jean Paul Sartre “recognizes that the body opens consciousness to being *affected*. His treatment of affectivity includes a discussion of pain, which he goes on to distinguish first from illness and then from disease” [7]. To more understand the idea in Sartre’s terms, we need to go back to his book, *Being and Nothingness*, where he explains that “in the disease itself the body is a given: by the very fact that it was the support of the illness” [8]. The body becomes a granted thing to fill the role of the container of the disease, bearing an alien, who will dictate his own orders upon the self. Dealing with the notion of the body, Sartre differentiates between the lived body, “I am my body” and the body-as-object, “I have a body.” This very division will permit us to more understand bodily alienation in the process of illness.

Just after Katherine’s departure, Stoner has his first illness.

He suffers a fever of "obscure origin" which deprives him of his power. As if something strange is happening to his body. At the beginning of sickness, the individual, as Kay Toombs clarifies in her book, *The Meaning of Illness*, feels "some alien bodily sensation" like a sudden pain or a weakness. A fatigue comes over Stoner and he fails to "shake it off," this is the first sign of his powerlessness in front of this stranger which will linger in his body, he is diagnosed with cancer. This sensation makes our protagonist tired and weary. As a consequence, and in the experience of illness Stoner's body becomes his major focus and all his attention switches to the bodily changes that he cannot control. Sartre's analysis in *Being and Nothingness* helps us understand this situation, when he explains that the body in illness "escapes me toward new characteristics which I establish as limits and empty schemata of organization" [6]. Not only are the body changes alien to the self, but they are also modifiers of its nature, they put it under the law of new rules which become the boundaries of its ability and its limitation. Fredrik Svenaeus adopts Sartre's views and elaborates on it saying that in illness "the lived body takes on alien qualities" [9], these new qualities overwhelm the patient with a sense of "unfamiliarity." It is "a fatal change" during which each of the self and the body starts to live in a separate dimension. So that illness is viewed as "unhomelike being-in-the-world in which the embodied ways of being-in-of the self have been thwarted" [9]. Again and again, illness is that "alien being" which threatens the normal process of life.

Therefore, Stoner goes through a number of tests and examinations that he cannot understand. Another time, he is alienated from his body as he gets knowledge about his sickness from the physician, and conceives of his body as object, something alien to him. At the stage of examination, the body turns into a mere "neurophysiologic organism." In hospital, Stoner, helplessly, had given his body to the doctors "to be poked and prodded, had let them strap him on a table, and had remained still" [10]. The body-as-object, which no longer belongs to Stoner, is what the doctors are treating. This view is further corroborated by Drew Leder who states that during the stage of examination, as the body "is objectified, examined, probed and needled, scanned and measured" [10], the patient experiences a feeling of division.

Stoner experiences his being as "being-for-others" in the sense that he gets concepts about his own body from the others who diagnose the disease, give the cure and even predict how long he has to live. To better understand the subject's alienation during examination, the following lines from Sartre's analysis about illness are worth the reading. Sartre says that "the doctor as listening to the sounds in my body, feeling my body with his body, and immediately the lived-designated becomes designated as a thing outside my subjectivity, in the midst of a world which is not mine. My body is alienated" [8]. In illness, the-body-as-object is "other-than-me," which escapes me, exists outside the sway of the self, outside its subjectivity. Sartre explains that during this experience the body flees from the subject to become "a-being-a-tool", or "a broken tool" according to Fredrik

Svenaeus.

Thus, Stoner loses control over his body. He wants to speak to his wife but he cannot even "trust his voice." His thoughts are imprisoned inside his mind, he fails to transform them into words, "as if some will other than his own had taken possession of that mind" [2]. Pain is "speech-destroying" as the American writer and professor, Drew Leder, puts it in his book *The Distressed Body*, pain ruins the subject's capacity to communicate. In Stoner, the protagonist finds himself uttering unreasonable and unfathomable words. As if someone else occupied his body and talked on his behalf. He wishes he could speak to Edith, to his friend Gordon, to ask them about many blurry things in his mind, he starts talking but "could not go on." Sartre talks about the same painful experience, claiming that "our own body can appear to us as the body of the other" [8]. Stoner is no longer able to understand the way his body functions. At a moment when he is trying to identify voices around him his "hearing seemed to go outside his body and hover like a cloud above him" [2]. The body weakens the function of the senses so that they leave in order to gain some strength. Besides his inability to speak clearly, he can barely walk, and finds "that it took most of his strength merely to walk from class to class" [2]. His body does not respond to his will, he loses autonomy upon it. Wanting to go to his room Stoner discovers that he is too weak in a way he never imagined, he finds difficulty to reach it and realizes that he can "go no farther." Now, he goes up the stairs "carefully," and doubts his ability to "make it home." Because of this new reality, Stoner's actions become uncanny, unnatural and alien to him. He begins to force his body to fulfill some tasks. With difficulty, Stoner stretches his hand to touch Edith as though "it were a long distance it had to go" [2]. Here, "the thing" hand is what exists, as Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*, the hand as object. The objectification of the body in illness makes from it "an oppositional force" which disobeys the patient's desires and needs and ignores his will. Even more, illness becomes a monster, Stoner compares the pain to "a cautious animal" which "receded into a darkness." Illness waits for our character until he gives up to attack him, it hides like a prudent animal waiting the appropriate moment to catch its prey.

The disease causes a sense of dysfunction and disability for Stoner, who feels his limitation and finds some difficulty to carry on with his normal ordinary life. Drew Leder affirms that the person becomes "banished from the daily round of roles and duties" [10]. The individual's access to the world cannot be fulfilled in a correct way. The protagonist finds himself obliged to change his habits and he starts to concern himself about the activities he has been doing spontaneously. Kay Toombs' claims, in *The Meaning of Illness*, are very much in line with this idea when she states that "in illness the possibilities for action shrink" [11]. The patient's activities are beyond reach, not any more within his "bodily scope."

Illness is a painful metamorphosis especially, according to Kay Toombs, when the patient is dealing with a chronic

disease, and when no recovery is possible. The disease becomes a permanent dysfunction. Stoner's feeling of helplessness and also hopelessness has intensified because his sickness is a long-term one, he knows that cancer will make from his body "his permanent home."

Moreover, illness becomes an obstacle to Stoner's plans, he finds himself obliged to accept retirement and leave the job he loves. He is trapped in his painful present unable to overcome the stage of disease and look forward. In the novel, Stoner's body turns into an impediment which stands in the face of his desires.

From another perspective, the alienation of Stoner is further intensified when he experiences a state of contradiction within himself: his body which becomes a stranger but still belongs to him. In Fredrik Svenaeus' words "the body is alien, yet, at the same time myself" [12]. In front of this reality the protagonist is helpless. Besides that, the disease is pitiless and unforgiving, it devours him from the inside as Edith tells her husband that he is "all eaten up inside" [2]. Illness has already changed Stoner's appearance, so it is a twofold alienation, from within and from without.

Stoner is bedridden watching alone the world from afar, hearing the "distant sound of laughter" [2], of some students passing by his house, he watches them from his window until they vanish. He cannot join the world outside the walls of his room, he is imprisoned in his sick body. Drew Leder in his book, *The Distressed Body*, voices the same thoughts when describing ill persons' state in their solitariness, the author speaks on their behalf, saying, "from our bedroom window we hear the bustle of the street, the sound of people on their way to work, but now as if from a great distance" [10]. Everything seems out of reach, as if the patients were exiled. Leder mentions that this banishment is not only a physical one, but it is also an epistemological banishment which alters the meaning of things. Stoner feels himself alone in the presence of others around him. His friend Gordon Finch visits him regularly and Edith takes care of him, enjoying the return of her "child." But Stoner ceases not to feel himself alone, pain is a "private sensation" which is enacted "within an interior theater" [2]. No one can exactly feel what Stoner is witnessing, it is a personal experience that secludes him from the outer world and thrusts him into a cold and isolated one.

More than that, the body in illness affects the protagonist's notion of temporality. Stoner's "sense of time was displaced" [2], it is what Toombs calls "a continuum of discomfort" during which all of the patient's pains gather in the present moment. Stoner is no longer conscious of the lived time, he enters a state of disorder and he wonders: "It must be very late, he thought; [...]. Or was it long ago? He could not tell" [2]. His sick body is lost in the universe, cast away in a strange land, "like the distant call of an old friend" [2]. Stoner's sick body loses guidance, going "in directions he could not understand; time passed, and he did not see it passing" [2]. In the process of illness, time slows down, it takes on new dimensions Stoner cannot fathom or become accustomed to.

#### 4. The Protagonist Inevitable Alienation in Death

When he was still a young man, Stoner had thought of death "either as a literary event or as the slow, quiet attrition of time against imperfect flesh" [2]. He has not yet realized the pain of death or feared its coming. Death or deaths "– and there are many deaths in our life – are the dreaded moments when we can no longer avoid facing the deep questions that we carry within us – these questions that lurk under the surface of all our endeavours and which life can brutally unleash at us – the questions that suck at our consciousness" [13]. After the passing of David Masters, Stoner begins to know how terrifying death is. The loss of his friend makes him think "of his death as another exile, more strange and lasting than he had known before" [2]. The protagonist fathoms that death is but a banishment from the world, a long-lasting one, and the ultimate stage of alienation in any man's journey.

In the midst of his painful illness, Stoner has tried to ignore his anxiety and fear about his end, until Grace's visit, some time before his death. He realizes that he will never see his daughter again, at this moment, his feelings progress from fear to refusal to the coming of this unwanted guest. He cannot accept the departure and he has "no wish to die" [2]. Stoner wishes he could postpone his fate, "like any traveler, he felt that there were many things he had to do before he left" [2]. He has spent his life searching for meaning but he has reached no purpose and will not reach any. He is still unready for the "suddenness" of death, though he expects it. Sartre helps us understand this difficult equation when, in *Being and Nothingness*, he argues that expecting death is different from waiting for it, even in the case of chronic diseases. Death is determined, but the process of realizing it cannot be determined. Stoner mourns for the time he has missed, and the time that would not come as death would limit any further possibility. Sartre clarifies that death is an impediment that debars the person from fighting for his life and says that death "haunts me at the very heart of each of my projects as their inevitable reverse side" [8]. Death ends Stoner's fight with life and throws him beyond the scope of ontology into continued alienation.

When Stoner feels the stillness of his body, he understands his need for somebody else's help. For a while, he thinks he has to call Edith, then he tells himself in a whisper that the "dying are selfish, he thought; they want their moments to themselves, like children" [2]. He wants to preserve this final time for himself, so he retreats into his self because he knows that Edith will not understand what he experiences, he wants to live his moment of collapse, or of weakness alone. The approach of death cuts Stoner away from his entourage and produces in him a growing sense of isolation. Donald Crosly in his book, *The Specter of the Absurd*, explains that when approaching their end, humans feel defeated and destroyed, we experience "an annihilating death that wipes us so cleanly from the state of existence as to make it appear that we had never lived" [14]. Stoner has wanted friendship and company, but he is sinking into

oblivion without reaching his aim. He will be forgotten by his colleagues, whom after his death consider his name as a mere sound that "evokes no sense" [11].

On his deathbed, Stoner is alienated into his decaying body. He admits his helplessness and the omnipresent force of an inevitable fate makes him concede defeat. Stoner and Andrews, in *Butcher's Crossing*, are alike. McDonalds, the buffalo hide trader, blames Andrews for his inability to change his life when change was possible: "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." [15]

McDonalds tells Andrews that he holds responsible for his futile life and that it is too late for change. Stoner also knows the truth too late when he is totally impotent, when his life is determined by external power. Death makes an end to the individual's attitude to become the end of his possibilities. For Sartre, death is the final battle between the self and the other, "the final fact" that "alienates us wholly in our life to the advantage of the other. To be dead" [8]. In death, the individual becomes a "being-for-others" and "a prey for the living," expelled from the world of the living to become an alien corpse, an object. At the end of the novel something fixes Stoner's body on his bed, and he passed away. Death scenes in many literary works tend to include the same elements: a soothing place, a spiritual satisfaction and a caring person. The last element is absent from Williams' death scene. His protagonist dies alone, the other characters are preoccupied with their own lives. Stoner is a stranger from the very beginning of the novel to the very end.

## 5. Conclusion

In the experience of alienation, the body goes through three stages, aging, illness and death. Throughout this journey, Stoner knows what writers call the death awakening. Before breathing his last, the protagonist embraces death with a feeling of contentment. He accepts his identity and takes pride in what he was able to achieve. Death turns into a moment of epiphany, finally "he was himself": a subjective understanding, one that cannot be communicated to others. Through his subjectivity, Stoner belatedly discovers his true sense of self. Or he comes to understand Sartre's philosophy that there "is another component of his theory of subjectivity: the idea that the body is a source of alienation" [16]. He dies with his book in his lap, the only one he wrote. He donates his soul to words, giving them an eternal life. This realization of giving birth to pages, both contains and contents him "until the old excitement that was like terror fixed him where

he lay" [2]. His alienated body leaves the world, his soul is still here.

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