
UNIT 1 THE NOVELIST AND HER MAIN THEMATIC CONCERNS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will acquaint you with the biographic details of the great Canadian writer Margaret Laurence and her major works. Although the most important thing about a writer is his/her work, yet the career biographies, tracing the development of the author's canon and the evolution of his/her reputation makes literature and its creators better understood and more accessible to students.

1.1 MARGARET LAURENCE - INTRODUCTION

Margaret Laurence is a writer of enormous stature who came out of the Canadian west at a time when the female prairie author was hardly recognized. W.H. New while writing of Margaret Laurence in his *Literary History of Canada* proclaims that the range and quality of her work made her the most recognized and accomplished of the writers of the 1960's. Michael Peterson, in his introduction to a special issue on Laurence in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* writes, that for many Canadians she has "become an eminent, a wise and generous voice providing insight into and guidance for a highly self-conscious nation in the process of reviewing its complicated history and complex character."

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Early years:

Margaret Laurence was born Jean Margaret Wemyss on 18th July 1926, in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa. Of Scottish ancestry, her father Robert Wemyss, also born in Neepawa was a lawyer of Irish ancestry, her mother Verna Simpson Wemyss was a talented pianist and music teacher. In 1930, at the age of thirty-four, Verna Wemyss died of a kidney infection. Her unmarried older sister Margaret

Simpson returned from Calgary, where she had been teaching, to look after young Margaret and eventually became her stepmother. With her Margaret Laurence's literary career had its beginning for they read many books and talked about literature especially about Canadian literature before it was taught in Canadian Universities and Schools. In 1933 Margaret Simpson and Robert Wemyss had one son. Two years later Robert Wemyss died of pneumonia.

In 1938 Margaret Simpson Wemyss moved the family into her eighty-two-year old father's house, where she cared for him as well as for two children. Young Margaret resented her grandfather's rigid authoritarianism. His strength was her "constant challenge to battle," as Clara Thomas has observed in her 1975 book *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. "She was challenged, but certainly not crippled, by this old, still fierce and autocratic man; her step-mother's supportive love and encouragement and her own strong spirit, well-matched to her grandfather's strength were constant, counterbalancing dynamics towards growth and achievement."

Six years later in 1944 Margaret Wemyss left Neepawa to take a scholarship at Winnipeg's United College, a United Church arts and theology college affiliated to the University of Manitoba. During her college years as an honors English student, she had several poems and stories published in *Vox*, the under-graduate paper. At this time, as Laurence noted in the essay "Ivory Towers or Grassroots?" (1978), she also became involved with the Old Left, a group of supporters of social reform: "My sense of social awareness, my feelings of anti-colonialism, anti-authoritarianism, had begun, probably, in embryo form in my own childhood; they had been nurtured during my college years and immediately afterwards in the North Winnipeg of the Old Left." The need to alleviate crippling social conditions that prevent man's full realization of his dignity and humanity is a constant theme of her fiction.

Having completed her graduation in 1947 Margaret Wemyss took a job as a reporter for the *Winnipeg Citizen*, where she wrote book reviews, a daily radio column, and reports on labor events. On 13 September of the same year she married Jack Laurence, a civil-engineering graduate of the University of Manitoba.

In 1949 the Laurences left Canada for England, and the following year they went from England to Africa where they lived for seven years. In 1950 Jack Laurence was appointed Director of a dam-building project in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, now Somalia. After the initial stages of the project were finished in 1952, he felt reluctant to stay on when the remaining work could be done by a Somali engineer. From 1952 until 1957 he continued his engineering work in the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Their daughter Jocelyn was born in 1952; their son David was born in 1955. Shortly before the day the Gold Coast received its independence as the state of Ghana in 1957, the Laurences returned to Canada.

1.3 THE AFRICAN SOJOURN AND ITS INFLUENCE

The African years were a stimulating challenge and a formative influence on Margaret Laurence's literary career. The opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture was a welcome contrast to the prairie world that pervaded her mental landscape. As Laurence puts it in *Heart of a Stranger* (1976): "The process of trying to understand people of another culture—their concepts, their customs, their life-view is a fascinating and complex one, sometimes frustrating, never easy, but in the long run enormously rewarding. One thing I learned, however, was that my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else. Living away from home gives a new perspective on home. I began to write out my own background only after I had lived some years away."

Though Somaliland became the setting for only one early short story "Uncertain Flowering," published in *Story 4* (1953) her two-year residence there is the subject of the haunting chronicle, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963). Completed in Vancouver in 1962, a decade after her departure from Somaliland, the book is less a travelogue or diary than a vivid re-creation of the confrontation between Canadians and Africans, between a gifted artist and the beliefs and culture of a foreign nation. Beginning as a chronicle of her time in Somaliland the book gradually becomes a portrait of a people. Each episode is a re-creation and a creation, conveying the alien world with factual fidelity yet shaping the facts through art. Again and again Laurence returns in the book to themes that permeate her fiction. She sees the Somalis living by faith, not logic, their faith being a constant source of differentiation between herself and her new world. She writes "But for myself, it did not apply, this faith, perhaps because I had never needed it the way they did. I viewed it from the outside. As far as I was concerned, God was deaf. If we did not hear the sound of each other's voices no one else would." Love is a source of another telling contrast. According to her, "Love between men and women did not here contain the dichotomy long ago imposed upon it in the western world by the church, that of separating it, as though it were oil and water into elements labeled 'spiritual' and 'physical.' And the book records many examples of the Somali ability to find resources, both materialistic and mental, to ensure personal survival.

Fascinated by the extensive oral literature of Somaliland, Laurence began translating poetry and folk tales shortly after her arrival. Her work led to a volume of translation: *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954), described in Laurence's introduction as "not the accumulation of the writings of centuries, but the stories of the highly imaginative race without a written language." When the book was republished in 1970, she reflected on its achievements in a new preface: "I suppose if I had known then the difficulties of translating literature, I would have not tried, but when a person is young and naïve, one will try anything, and probably that isn't such a bad thing. These translations are amateurish..., however, I think it was a good thing that the translations.. were done, partly because they constituted the first collection to be translated into English and partly because I think they do convey some sense of life and concepts of the Somali nomadic people... My main reservation about these remarks would be that I was in places unwittingly condescending in the manner of white liberals, out of pure ignorance, for Somaliland was my first contact with a culture other than my own, and I had much to learn about the validity of human differences—I still have, but at least I know it now."

Somali literature heightened Laurence's natural interest in the past and in the social and familial roots. Many contemporary African writers, she observes in *Heart of a Stranger*, "re-create their people's past in the novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value from which they were separated by two or three generations of colonialism and missionizing. They have found it necessary, in other words, to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being satisfied or threatened by that past." In another decade Laurence would have begun the arduous task of chronicling the Canadian past.

Laurence set two volumes of fiction in the Gold Coast. Her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), and a collection of short stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963). All her African fiction centers on independence, both personal and political, and rarely has an outsider captured with such pathos the struggles and causalities of an alien world coming into self-realization. The fiction shows characters caught between the biases of their traditions and the bid for liberation. Frequently there are clashes between the imperialists viewing with skepticism and bitter resentment the Africanization of their industries and the Africans detesting their arrogant and condescending employees.

The stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* were written and published individually from 1954 to 1962. Some have a first-person narrator, some have a third-person narrator,

yet each narrator is an outsider, exiled from some aspect of his natural world. The outsider may be an alien to Africa or he may be an African caught up in the new technology and rendered alien to his tribal values. The point of view in each story is that of an ironist, "not the ironist who assumes superiority of understanding or sophistication of intellect and so condescends to her subjects and characters," writes Clara Thomas, "but the ironist who sees at once the immense vitality and the enormous contradictions of joy and pain, hopes and achievements, among the people of an emergent nation." (*The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*)

The chapters of *This Side Jordan* alternately concern the African protagonist, Nathaniel Amegbe, who though educated by Christian Missionaries and freed in his own mind from his tribal past, remains attached to the ways of his people, and the English protagonist, Johnnie Kestoe, the son of poor Irish Catholics, who has rejected his religious upbringing and come to the Gold Coast as an accountant in a textile firm. As their parallel stories become increasingly interdependent, the novel becomes a chronicle of war between native traditions and the values of the imperialist. Though the symmetry of the plot may be too neat, the novel has an abundance of carefully delineated and realistic characters set on a rich canvas that captures the complexity of social change.

The final dimension of Laurence's African writing is found in her critical study *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966* (1968). Here Laurence offers the best explanation for her interest in and indebtedness to African literature and culture: "Although Nigerians during the colonial period lost their own past, they never lost their land, for there were no white settlers as there were, for example, in Kenya. Whether or not this may have assisted them in maintaining some kind of inner strength and self-faith, it is impossible to know." Inner strength and self-faith are the goals of the protagonists of Laurence's fiction as described in her essay "Ivory Towers or Grass Roots?" "The themes of freedom and survival relate both to the social/external world and to the spiritual/inner one, and they are themes which are both political and religious. If freedom is, in part, the ability to act out of one's own self-definition, with some confidence and with compassion, uncompelled by fear or by the authority of others, it is also a celebration of life and of the mystery at life's core."

1.4 THE CANADIAN PHASE

When the Laurences left Africa in 1957 they took up residence in Vancouver, where they lived for five years. This phase saw Laurence complete most of her African fiction and write the first draft of *The Stone Angel*, but this time was personally and mentally trying. She was starved for the company of other writers, though she did make the acquaintance of Ethel Wilson, who offered encouragement and support. Her personal life was also trying, and in 1962 she separated from her husband, taking the two children to England where they lived first in London before settling the following year at Elm Cottage, Penn, Buckinghamshire.

Distanced from Canada, she returned to the draft of *The Stone Angel*, rewrote it, and saw it published in 1964. The first of five books set in the fictional prairie town of Manawaka, the novel regarded as a classic, announced the maturity of the talent evident throughout her African fiction, but her fiction was now rooted firmly and fully in her own Canadian world.

Laurence regarded herself as a member of the second generation of Canadian writers. The first generation including Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, and Ernest Buckler, rejected British and American models to write. Of these writers the most significant for Laurence's writing was Ross. As she remarked to Graeme Gibson in an interview for his *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (1973), when she first read

As For Me and My House (1941) in her midteens, she confronted a novel written "out of a prairie background which was very similar to mine, and I thought: it can be done."

**The Novelist
and Her Main
Thematic
Concerns**

The influence of *As For Me and My House* on Laurence parallels the influence of *The Stone Angel* on younger Canadian writers. Jack Hodgins, for example, acknowledges the importance of the novel as the first he read with a voice and a world directly related to his western sympathies. From the time of the publication of *The Stone Angel*, Laurence has represented for younger writers a voice of intelligence and discernment, a Canadian novelist interested less in social realism than in the paradoxes of the human individual. Of his early days as a writer, Dave Godfrey has commented: "At that time, I was writing very assiduously for Margaret Laurence. I had never met her, but I had this idea of an educated, sensitive, experienced reader who knew the tradition of the story and recent developments and yet was a Canadian with a feel for myth and for all those repressions and fears which hang up twelve Canadians out of ten. So I wrote for Margaret Laurence." (Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 53, Gale Research Inc. Detroit, London, 1986) p.265)

The Stone Angel is Hager Shipley's personal account of the last few days of her life. With memory in a state of disordered energy, the ninety-year-old narrator unconsciously weaves episodes from her past into her painful present. The novel's structure follows the process of her mind, the entire book being composed of flashbacks occurring in a progressive chronological pattern and alternating with scenes in the present. At the beginning, Hagar is blind, like the statue of the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery. All her life has been a display of pride as she struggles to hide her emotions and live in self-sufficient isolation. During a life time of wrangling she never learns how to express or to accept love; she tries to hide her inner failure, that she has never known the ability to rejoice. In the end, however her pride gives way to need. In Hagar, as Laurence has noted in an interview included in Donald Cameron's *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (1973), "part of her goal is simply survival to survive until the moment she dies, with some kind of dignity and some kind of human value. She always tried to put the hooks on people, to influence people, to manipulate them, her husband and her sons, and she has never really allowed them to go free, so she has never been free herself: this is what she comes to understand in the very last days of her life."

Whereas *The Stone Angel* is set in Laurence's grandparents' generation her second Manawaka novel and winner of a Governor General's Award, *A Jest of God* (1966), is set in her own generation. The narrator and protagonist, Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year-old single woman, a school teacher, endures the long, hot summer of Manawaka. While resigned to the Presbyterian sterility of the town and the oppressive presence of her mother, she harbours a rebellious craving for love. Though her summer affair with Nick Kazlik, a schoolmate from early years who now teaches in Winnipeg, comes to an abrupt end, it has a positive effect to Graeme Gibson, "We are not God, but what Nick did for Rachel was to enable her to reach out, hold and touch another human being, which was what the sexual experience meant for her. It was the reaching out to another person and making herself vulnerable, as Rachel was able to do ultimately, with Nick, which led her to be able—to some limited extent—to liberate herself." (Gibson Graeme: *Eleven Canadian Novelists*) Laurence's novel served as the source of the 1968 Warner Bros. film *Rachel* and was republished as *Now I Lay Me Down*, during the same year.

The protagonist of the third Manawaka novel, *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), is Rachel's thirty-nine-year old sister, Stacey Cameron MacAindra who buys a railroad ticket out of Manawaka as soon as she has saved enough money. Now through a series of flashbacks, memories, fantasies, through a mingling of first-person and third-person narrative, she examines her tangled life in Vancouver. Instead of the anticipated enlargement of her personal horizon, she finds enslavement to her four children, her dull husband, and approaching old age. By the end of her mental journey, however, she sees the complexity of life and the problems other people face. No longer scarred

by life, she has the will to continue living. "The fire theme threads through the novel," Laurence commented in *Heart of a Stranger*, "the fires both inner and outer, and if we are to live in the present world, we must learn to live within the fires and still survive until we die."

While writing the three Manawaka novels Laurence was also working on a series of seven short stories, "fictionalized autobiography" as she called them, which were published separately in the 1960s. Adding one further story, she collected them under the title *A Bird in the House* (1970). The protagonist, Vanessa MacLeod, is another young inhabitant of Manawaka, and the stories follow ten years in her life that coincide in part with World War II. Though Vanessa is the narrator and protagonist, the center of the book is her hard, autocratic grandfather, and his centrality underlines the importance of the stories as cathartic autobiography. "I did not realize until I had finished the final story in the series," Laurence reflected in *Heart of a Stranger*, "how much all these stories are dominated by the figure of my maternal grandfather, who came of Irish Protestant stock. Perhaps it was through writing these stories that I finally came to see my grandfather not only as the repressive authoritarian figure from my childhood, but also as a boy who had to leave school in Ontario when he was about twelve, after his father's death, and who as a young man went to Manitoba by sternwheeler and walked the fifty miles from Winnipeg to Portage La Prairie, where he settled for some years before moving to Neepawa. He was a very hard man in many ways, but he had a very hard life. I don't think I knew any of this, really knew it, until I had finished those stories. I don't think I ever knew, either, until that moment how much I owed to him. One sentence, near the end of the final story, may show what I mean. — "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins."

In 1967, Laurence turned her attention to a children's book. That story became *Jason's Quest* (1970), which she has described as "a gift" because of the rapidity with which she wrote the first draft. Jason, a mole, seeks a cure for the invisible sickness destroying Molanium and the molefolk. "Knowledge," he is told, "can be learned from books. But wisdom, now—wisdom must be learned from life itself." And the acquisition of wisdom has been central to the journey of many of Laurence's protagonists. In the late 1970s Laurence wrote three more children's books, *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *Six Cows* (1979), *Six Darn Cows* (1970), and *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980).

For more than a decade Laurence lived at Elm Cottage, though she made frequent visits to Canada. In 1969, when she accepted an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of Toronto, she had already decided to return to Canada permanently when her children completed their schooling in England. Shortly after beginning the Toronto position, she bought a small cedar cabin on the Otonabee River near Peterborough, Ontario, where she spent the summers of 1971, 1972, and 1973. *The Diviners* (1974), Laurence's fourth Manawaka novel and winner of her second Governor General's Award, was written partly in the winters in England, yet mainly during the Ontario summers. In 1973 Laurence accepted an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of Western Ontario. The following year she accepted a similar position at Trent University after she had settled permanently in Lakefield, Ontario.

The end of her decade in England and the beginning of her new residence in Canada also marked the publication of *The Diviners*, (1974) a unique portrait of Manawaka since Morag Gunn, the forty-seven-year-old narrator and protagonist, is not a woman of Manawaka. She is an outsider, a girl who comes to Manawaka and later tries to escape from it, only to realize that escape can be solely physical. When Laurence suggested that this novel might be her last or at least her last about Manawaka, she was understating its epic significance, for the novel is the culmination and completion of her investigation of the town. Her investigation comes to an end with her employment of Morag, an outsider and a novelist. Here is Manawaka from the

perspective of the writer in Manawaka. And Morag's personal search for understanding the pattern of her life complements a much larger ambition: *The Diviners* is an exploration of the role of the artist, and most important, the centrality of the past to the artist's understanding of her own position in the flux of time.

The Novelist and Her Main Thematic Concerns

Completed when Laurence herself was forty-seven, *The Diviners* is her *bildungsroman*, the novel that records the growth, education, and maturing of the individual, frequently with autobiographical overtones. Laurence's early upbringing corresponds to the family life of Vanessa MacLeod, in *A Bird in the House*. The autobiographical dimension of *The Diviners* finds an embodiment of Laurence's ideas about art and life in Morag. For Laurence, Manawaka's creator, and for Morag Gunn, Manawaka's historian in the fictional world, art is the distillation of the private and the fictional, and the mysterious process of literary creation provides the theme and the form of *The Diviners*. At the end Morag has summoned up all her past and discovers her own place in Canada: "This place is some kind of a garden... Nonetheless, even though it may be only a wildflower garden..." Like her creator, Morag transforms her garden into art. At the conclusion of her mental journey she "returned to the house to write the remaining private and fictional worlds, and to set down her title." With its final setting in eastern Ontario, *The Diviners* is Laurence's farewell to Manawaka, "that prairie town-which is partly my own town and partly a town of the mind." The epic dimensions of Morag's reliving of her life and, through stories and ballads, her ancestral past give the novel a quality of finality and summation that makes it a natural conclusion to its creator's imaginative involvement with the prairie town. Two years after the appearance of *The Diviners*, Laurence's collection of critical and autobiographical essays, *Heart of a Stranger* was published.

1.5 AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

Laurence's efforts and her talent have been widely recognized over the course of her career. In addition to her two Governor General's Awards, she has received the Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award (1961), three president's medals from the University of Western Ontario (1961, 1962, 1964), a Molson Prize (1975), Periodical Distributors' Award (1977), and a City of Toronto Award of Merit (1978). Laurence has been named companion of the Order of Canada (1971), fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1977), and recipient of honorary degrees from United College (1966), McMaster University (1970), Trent University (1971), Dalhousie University (1971), University of Toronto (1971), Carleton University (1974), Brandon University (1975), Queen's University (1975), University of Western Ontario (1975), Simon Fraser University (1977), York University (1980), and Victoria University (1982). In 1981 she accepted a three-year appointment as Chancellor of Trent University.

When Margaret Laurence died on January 5, 1987 she had published sixteen books along with many poems, addresses and articles in journals, magazines and newspapers.

1.6 MAIN THEMATIC CONCERNS

1.6.1 Novel of Middle Class Aspiration

Despite Laurence's left wing sympathies, despite her growing desire to address issues of dispossession and social injustice, *The Stone Angel* is very much a novel of middle class aspiration, action, and folly. Proud descendent of a family that could claim connections, a lapsed Scottish baronetcy, and self-made success in pioneering Canada, Hagar Shipley has little time for the larger questions of social order and justice. Though she oscillates like a pendulum between her personal impulses, so strong is her ethic of self-reliance that she fails to see clearly the plight of the farmers

she knows during the Depression of the 1930s or the sense of loss, and desperation of the local Metis of Manawaka. Indeed, the novel very carefully suggests that Hagar's blindness to the larger issues of social justice is typical of many people of her generation. As close as she was to the actual effects of the Depression on farmers and to the Metis friends favoured by her husband Bram and her son John, she steeled herself against any potential awareness of or empathy with such experiences. Her "respectability" threatened by them, she needs to hold herself aloof from, superior to the "bunch of breeds and never-do-wells and Galicans" she is obliged to feed during harvest time. Pride both blinds and sustains her when her social identity is questioned.

1.6.2 View of Fate in *The Stone Angel*

The Stone Angel is a study of a feisty individual forced to endure circumstances grotesquely at odds with her self-image. It enacts a capricious view of fate and presents fate as an amalgam of character and circumstance, the two forces interacting in a complex manner. The individual is certainly the victim, (in Laurence's phrase in *The Stone Angel*) "of the jokes or jests of God". These "jests" however, often have their root in individual character. In Hagar's case, "it is the pendulum like oscillation between impulses of order and disorder, respectability and passion, dynastic pride and individual need that dictate the unfolding of her life and characterize her blindness." (*Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* p.77) God's great joke is that "one discovers so many things too late", most notably the wilderness that pride can make of a life and the self-enclosure that is the outward aspect of self-reliance. It never occurs to Hagar to ask the serious question "why" when it comes to the tyranny of social circumstances.

1.6.3 Development of Canada

In her Canadian fiction, by attending tenaciously to the tight-fisted, unyielding, and proud Scottish spirit, Laurence touched a major nerve in the Canadian sensibility. Though *The Stone Angel* is unabashedly middle-class, Scottish and small town in its emphasis, it still captures something essential about the energy, enterprise, and mad pattern of the settlement and development that have characterised not only the growth of Manitoba but of Canada as a whole. The Scot's middle-class outlook incarnated in Jason Currie and passed on to his rebellious daughter, is the firm base upon which, in her later Manawaka novels Laurence was able, without inconsistency to integrate her developing left-wing concerns, particularly her empathy with the victims and the dispossessed who had been cast aside in the provinces and the country's growth. Michael A. Peterman rightly argues that the recognition of *The Stone Angel* "Suggests the success with which Laurence shaped her novel to present a compelling version of formative stages of Canadian identity. In linking her vision to that of her friend, historian W.L. Morton, she assimilated Morton's work with her own experience and the past of her people." (*Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* p. 80) Laurence cites Morton's *Manitoba: A History* as the "book about my land that has meant the most to me". "When I first read(it)", she adds, "it was with a tremendous sense of exoitement, combined with an angry sense of having been deprived, when young, of my own heritage. I have since done a great deal of reading of prairie history, but it was Morton who first gave me the sense of my place's long and dramatic past". (*Books that Mattered to Me* 1981) In *The Stone Angel* the dream of dynasty, in itself both compelling and destructive, becomes a map of Manitoban and Canadian heritage.

1.6.4 The Quest for Understanding

The Stone Angel is permeated with an unflagging quest to know more to understand better, to recover and recognize what is best and most worthwhile in human experience. Michael A. Peterman says that in *The Stone Angel* "the process of and the emphasis upon recovery, the struggle to understand what has eluded knowing is made heroic, heartening and significant". (as quoted by Clara Thomas in her article

Clara Thomas looks at *The Stone Angel* as a valuable study of the enclosed “garrison culture” of North American settlements and of the religion that supported and often distorted the spirit of their people. She argues that the overwhelming question at the heart of *The Stone Angel* is “one of many-prismed conflict, between the individual’s needs and demands and society’s, between God’s law and man’s understanding and interpretation of that law, between the rule of the community and the rule of the heart, between pride and love”. (“Pilgrims Process: Margaret Laurence and Hagar Shipley”)

1.6.5 Freedom, Faith and Life’s Meaning

Once when asked about other novelists’ influence on her work Laurence could give just one name – the name of Joyce Cary. Cary was a religious novelist and the over-arching themes of all his works are freedom, faith and the revelations of life’s meaning and purpose that come as gifts of grace. Shortly before his death, he described his purpose thus: “What I set out to do was to show these people, living each in his own world by his own ideas, and relating his life and struggles, his triumphs and miseries in that world. Their situation, in short, was to be that of everyone who is doomed or blessed to be a free soul in the free world and solve his problems as he goes through it.....” (*The Writer and the Theme*) Margaret Laurence has written and spoken of freedom as a major theme in her work, but she has publically explored the foundation of her writing much less than Cary did and she has shown the workings of faith and grace in her character’s lives rather than writing theoretically about these things. She believed with William James that “to be converted, to be regenerated to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong and inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.” (*The Writer and the Theme* p.78) *The Stone Angel* while charting the life span of Hagar describes such experiences and their effect on her.

1.6.6 Pride in Financial Success

When Hagar Shipley was a child in the 1880s, Manawaka was still close to its beginnings, with board sidewalks, oil lamps, a few successful businesses such as Jason Currie’s store, institutions such as the well-tended cemetery, the everpresent undertaker and the churches, especially the Presbyterian church:

I’d be about eight when the new Presbyterian church went up. Its opening service was the first time Father let me go to church with him instead of to Sunday School. It was plain and bare and smelled of paint and new wood, and they hadn’t got the stained glass windows yet, but there were silver candlesticks at the front, each bearing a tiny plaque with Father’s name, and he and several others had purchased family pews and furnished them with long cushions of brown and beige velour, so our few and favoured bottoms would not be bothered by hard oak and a lengthy service.

“On this great day”, the Reverend Dougall MacCulloch said feelingly, “we have to give special thanks to those of our congregation whose generosity and Christian contributions have made our new church possible.”

He called them off, the names, like an honour role. Luke McVitie, lawyer, Jason Currie, businessman, Freeman McKendrick, bank manager, Burns MacIntosh, farmer, Rab Fraser, farmer.

Father sat with modestly bowed head, but turned to me and whispered very low: "I and Luke McVitie must've given the most, as he called our names the first." (*The Stone Angel*, p.15)

Pride in financial success, in "getting ahead" was inextricably linked to religion in Hagar Currie's Manawaka. The isolation of small groups of people in a vast land was one of the factors in the growth of a town's personality; in English Canada the other factor was the drive to build a progressive, successful and Protestant community. Ideals of godliness and business enterprise were closely meshed, especially so for those whose religion incorporated the old, passionately-argued Calvinistic doctrines of predestination and of the elect. Though these grim articles of faith were considerably less than ramrod strong in Canadian Presbyterians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there still existed a residual, crude but powerful belief that the elect of God, the saved, shone by their works and, therefore, the man who succeeded in the world's terms by his own labours had also succeeded in God's terms. His outward success was the sign of his favoured status among the elect. Hence Jason Currie's unrelenting drive for success, his pride in it and its link to his religion:

He was a self-made man. He had started off without a bean, he was fond of telling Matt and Dan, and had pulled himself up by his bootstraps.... *The devil finds work for idle hands*. He put his faith in homilies. They were his Pater Noster, his Apostles' Creed. He counted them off like beads on a rosary, or coins in the till. *God helps those who help themselves. Many hands make light work.* (*The Stone Angel* p.8)

1.6.7 The Theme of Exile and Communication

Margaret Atwood, one of the most formidable and well known writers of Canada states that "Margaret Laurence was no bulldozer. Nor was she the least bit interested in being a legendry figure; she was far too involved in the joys and despairs of being human." (*Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*) The most important and unique talent given to human beings is the ability to communicate. But it is easier said than done. No wonder an important theme running through all the African or Canadian works of Margaret Laurence is the experience of foreignness, of the special self-recognition that comes to exiles, of the difficulty of communicating over cultural barriers. In Somaliland when she could not find any other reading material, she read for the first time the five books of Moses in a Gideon Bible. The lines "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were stronger, in the land of Egypt." lingered on, echoing through Margaret Laurence's career, summarizing much of her experience as a stranger, and taking on a new relevance when she found that "my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else." (*Heart of a Stranger* p.11) Certainly the Somali experience, as it affected Laurence herself and other Europeans, underlies the pre-occupation with exile, from one's own land from one's adopted land, even from a traditional way of life in *This Side Jordan* and *The Tomorrow Tamer*. Always behind these stories about exiles or misfits or people thrust out of their traditional ways by the forces of change, there lurks deeper strangeness which comes from the difficulty of human communication of any kind. While writing about Chinua Achebe's preoccupation with communication she ends her study of him in this way, "there is one theme, which runs through everything he has written – human communication or the lack of it. He shows the impossibly complicated difficulties of one person speaking to another, attempting to hear—really to hear—what another is saying. In his novels we see man as a creature whose means of communication are both infinitely subtle and infinitely clumsy, a prey to invariable misunderstandings. Yet Achebe's writing conveys the feeling that we must attempt to communicate, however imperfectly if we are not to succumb to despair or madness." (*Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*)

The difficulty and the necessity of communication is not only the major theme of such novels as *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers*, but is also a leading preoccupation of the principal characters in each of these works.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Wemyss Laurence grew up in Neepawa, Manitoba, a small town northwest of Winnipeg. Her roots in Neepawa go back to the beginning of the town and its pioneers. Her mother died when she was four and she lost her father when she was ten. Until she went away to the United College in Winnipeg, she lived with her grandfather her step-mother and her brother. She started her writing career with the publication of poems and stories in *Vox*. She wrote for the newspaper and the radio also. She got married to a Civil Engineer in 1947 and in 1949 left Canada for England. The following year the couple left for Africa where they lived for seven years. The African years not only gave her an opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture they exerted a formative influence on Laurence's literary career also. Living away from home gave a new perspective on home. She was fascinated by the extensive oral literature of Somaliland. Somali literature heightened her interest in the past and in the social and familial roots as they help an individual in recovering a sense of self, an identity and a feeling of value. In Africa she translated poetry and folk tales. Laurence left Africa in 1957 and lived in Vancouver for five years. During this period she completed her African fiction and wrote the first draft of *The Stone Angel* which was ultimately published in 1964. With the publication of *The Stone Angel* her fiction now rooted firmly and fully in her own Canadian world. Laurence regarded herself as a member of the second generation of Canadian novelists. From among the first generation of Canadian writers, she found Sinclair Ross most significant. As a Canadian novelist she was interested less in social realism than in the paradoxes of the human individual. *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers* are known as the Manawaka cycle. *A Bird in the House* is a series of short stories, 'fictionalized autobiography' as she called it. Her fourth Manawaka novel *The Diviners* is a unique portrait of Manawaka since Morag Gunn, the protagonist is not a woman of Manawaka. *The Diviners* is an embodiment of Laurence's ideas about art and life. The merits of Laurence's works and her talent won two Governor General's Awards along with many more and has secured for her a place of pride in the history of Canadian literature.

1.8 GLOSSARY

Condescending:	to descend willingly from a superior position.
Imperialist:	pertaining to, or of the nature of an empire or emperor.
Presbyterian:	a religious body formed by the union of the secession and relief churches in 1847, included in the United Free Church from 1900, and in the church of Scotland from 1929.
Buildungsroman:	a novel that records the growth education and maturing of the individual, frequently with autobiographical overtones.

1.9 QUESTIONS

1. How was Margaret Laurence benefitted by her sojourn in Africa?
2. As a second generation Canadian novelist what are the favourite themes in Margaret Laurence's fiction – both African and Canadian?
3. What are the main thematic concerns in *The Stone Angel*?

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UNIT 2 HAGER AND THE THEME OF SELF-ALIENATION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Hagar Shipley – A Character Portrait
- 2.3 *The Stone Angel* as Vollendungsroman
- 2.4 Self-Alienation of the Elderly and *The Stone Angel*
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 Questions
- 2.8 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is twofold: to introduce and discuss the enigmatic yet fascinating character of Hagar, the protagonist in *The Stone Angel* and to establish how this classic work, by making the ninety year old Hagar its heroine, has joined the newly emerging literature that deals with the lives of the aging and the elderly.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Clara Thomas in her pioneering work *Margaret Laurence* argues that the deepest well of Laurence's creative vision is her interest in and understanding of human beings, her respect for them and her compassion for their everlasting terrors. *The Stone Angel* the first of Laurence's Manawaka works has received more critical attention than any of her other writings. Opinions are divided as to the success of the novel's technique but critics are unanimous in their praise for Laurence's creation of the novel's central character, Hagar Shipley, who reigns as queen of all characters in Canadian literature. According to Professor Read "Hagar... finally transcends fiction to the world of supra-reality inhabited by literature's great characters." He further remarks "It is the creation of Hagar Shipley that clearly marks for me at least the emergence of Margaret Laurence as a fine novelist. For the first business of a serious novelist is the creation of character. When any character slips, almost imperceptibly perhaps, beyond the realm of obvious fiction into the works of reality then the summit of the novelist's art has been achieved. Such is Hagar. She belongs in that great company that begins with Chaucer's Monk and Pardoner, Prioress and Wife of Bath and stretches through the works of the great, down to our present day. At times vicious and vulgar, irascible and prideful, stubborn and independent, she is by no means lovable; but she is capable of profound feelings and in the end demands respect." (*A Place to Stand On*, p.42) Laurence agrees with Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that the novel exists above all to express character because only there, can the drama of life, and reality itself be seized. For Laurence the novel strives "to catch vast and elusive life." To put down life or one's consciousness, fiction must dramatize the intimate, vital, and contradictory working of the human mind. A great literary work portrays the "human individual" who is inherently paradoxical amazingly strong yet often weak—the source of both wonder and pity. It celebrates his or her uniqueness by exploring his or her inner most being. This is what Margaret Laurence has done in *The Stone Angel*.

According to Michael Peterman, Hagar is characterised in terms of the prairie. She lives as a struggling farmer's wife for some twenty four years, a rugged kind of experience known by none of Laurence's other Manitoba born but town raised protagonists. Having endured the deep rooted quarrel of her marriage and having struggled to raise her children often under difficult and impoverished conditions, Hagar feels much put upon and threatened by others in *The Stone Angel*. "I've never had a moment to myself, that's been my trouble," she thinks, but her real trouble, which she struggles to understand and to put into words, is that "she is strangely cast." Hers is a temperament torn between impulses of order and disorder, refinement and toughness, propriety and desire and impulses justified in her own mind by her pride in her family and the urgency of her own passions. The struggle of her last days is not only a struggle to maintain independence and control: it is an almost "inadvertent plumbing of the junkyard of her memory." In so doing she finds herself at last able to measure the extent of her misjudgements of those closest to her and to break out, to some small extent, of the prison of her nature.

Like her biblical namesake, Hagar wanders in a wilderness and like the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, the prairie town where she grew up, "she was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight." (p.3) At ninety, when the book begins, she is grotesque with the fat ugliness of her old age, and her nature is twisted and distorted by the self-willed tragedies of her life. She is a proud, bitter, sick, and frightened old woman with a whip-lash tongue to cut and mock, even at herself. Above all, she is "rampant with memory"; and she is still, and desperately, rampant with life. We share in her last short and bitter struggle to maintain her independence; more important, we share in her halting, unwilling, rebellious journey toward self-knowledge and, finally, peace.

The actual events of the novel take place over a short time span—two, perhaps three weeks. But in the sharp struggle of these last days, Hagar recalls, defends, questions, and finally accepts and understands all the events and the feelings that have always been important to her. She moves from the present to the past and back again, with an ease that is completely familiar to those who have listened to and watched the old. The anxiety, lest she confuses past and present and so prove herself to be as "queer" and incapable as her own son and daughter-in-law think her to be, is familiar too. To one caught up in her struggle, her climaxing, temporary defeat-and-release in irrationality, when she confuses past and present and speaks the healing, forgiving words to her companion in flight (whom she mistakes for her dead son, John), is quite simply, unbearably moving.

Hagar lives with her son, Marvin, and his wife Doris, both of them well into their sixties, in a house in Vancouver which she worked for and bought; a house which is the sum of all her achievements. Its familiarity, its possession, and the tokens it holds from the past—the oak chair that belonged to her father, Jason Curie; the cut glass decanter, her wedding gift from Bram Shipley are the only solid evidences of identity that Hagar now possesses: "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I may be found at all." (p.36)

But she is ill, stabbed with a pain under her ribs that grips her without warning; grotesquely fat and uncertain on her feet; sometimes *incontinent*; unable to care for herself and yet resentful of Doris and Marvin's fussy care and bumbling concern; completely at the mercy of her physical debility and revolted at its manifestations; and yet merciless toward those who try to help and capable of merciless honesty toward her physical self: "I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribed over the face with an indelible pencil. The skin itself is the silverfish white of the creature one fancies must live

under the sea where the sun never reaches. Below the eyes the shadows bloom as though two soft black petals had been stuck there. The hair which should by rights be black is yellowed white, like damask stored too long in a damp basement.” (p. 79)

Hagar is repellent physically and just as ugly in her cruelty toward Doris, “That Doris,... she heaves and strains like a calving cow.” (p.31) and blind and mistaken in her judgement of Marvin “There is a boy who never gets upset, not even at what happened to his own brother. (p.65)” But she demands and compels sympathy, a grudging admiration and the tension of partisanship which one always accords the gallant fighter fated to lose. Only her body has aged: her spirit is indomitably young and brave. “I never got used to a single thing,” she says: and her unchanging dark eyes symbolize the stubbornly vital, flaming spirit: “for when I look in my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Currie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself... The eyes change least of all.” (p.38)

The sensual aspect of Hagar’s character refuses to change. Hagar at ninety is still delighted by her senses’ gratification. In fact she is often greedy for them. She loves colour: the back-garden yellow with forsythia; her lilac silk dress, “a real silk, mine, spun by worms in China, feeding upon the mulberry leaves.” (p.29) She grudgingly admires Doris’ food and heartily enjoys it, whatever the cost to her tired digestive system. “I eat well. My appetite is usually very good. I have always believed there could not be much wrong with a person if they ate well. Doris has done a roast of beef, and she gives me the inner slices, knowing I like it rare, the meat a faint, brownish pink. She makes good gravy, to give her due. It’s never lumpy, always silken brown. For desert we have peach pie, and I have two helpings. Her crust’s little richer than I used to make, and not so flaky, but quite tasty nevertheless.” (p.67)

Colours, sounds, smells come to her as vividly as they ever did, from her past and from her present; and the old woman is still almost miraculously identifiable as the same Hagar who had begun to enjoy sex very soon after her marriage, though she was too proud to let Bram, her husband, know it. When she had finally taken John and left Manawaka and Bram, “I’d waken, sometimes, out of a half sleep and turn to him and find he wasn’t beside me, and then I’d be filled with such a bitter emptiness it seemed the whole of night must be within me and not around or outside at all. There were times when I’d have returned to him, just for that.” (p.160)

Clara Thomas rightly argues that it is an enormous affirmation of living and feeling that Hagar makes, and to its energy one cannot help responding. Nor can one help a response compounded of pity and wonder at her stubborn gallantry and at the pathos and irony of a recurrent double-exposure image of Hagar—old, ugly, chained, and earthbound by her physical disintegration and young, vivid, strong, as untamed as a hawk: “yet now I feel that if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take, it by surprise I would see there again that Hagar, with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the raising ring, the young ladies’ academy in Toronto.” (p.42)

Hagar lives in battle, pitted against everyone who comes close to her and, tragically, she betrays them all—her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons, even John, the younger one, whom she loves and would have helped. But by that time her pattern is set and she does not know the way. The pride that destroys her relations with others is established in the first paragraph of the novel as her father’s error also. Like her father’s enormous will, Hagar’s too is directed towards mean objects, towards “getting ahead” and being a name and a force in the microcosmic, claustrophobic world of Manawaka.

She takes and treasures the ancient battle-cry of the Currie clan, “Gainsay who Dare,” but ironically, her “daring” is the destructive defiance of her marriage to Bram Shipley, against her father, against the town which she pretends to despise, and very

shortly against Bram himself. She thinks her son, John is heir to the old spirit of the battle-cry, but she betrays him in the name of "common-sense" and "getting ahead." So John dies, daring all right, as does Arlene whom he loves; but in a stupid, pointless, drunken dare—in hopeless rebellion against hostile circumstances which Hagar has partially contrived.

William New describes Hagar as an essentially tragic figure, and her moment of truth as the deepest point of her tragedy: "Joy is for the Sarahs of the world: but she is Hagar. Her identity will not allow it." (*Introduction* p. lx) Patricia Morle does not endorse this view of Hagar. According to her this interpretation of the biblical archetype slights the tension in Hagar's character. It also disregards the novel's tragicomic tone and most important, Hagar's movement towards freedom in the closing chapters. "Tragic narrative ends in the isolation of the protagonist, while comedy depicts the social integration of the individual. Integration includes an advance in self-knowledge." (*Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*)

The closing chapters chronicle Hagar's gradual reconciliation with her world and herself. At Shadow Point, where Murray Lees's story of losing his infant son in a fire releases her memories of John's death, Hagar speaks to Murray the apology she owes to her son. Sensing her confusion, Murray plays John's role just as Hagar's brother Matt had taken on their mother's role when Dan died. In this replaying of the past, Hagar is permitted to tell John/Murray that his lover Arlene is, after all, welcome in their house. Hagar's descent into her shadow self, a kind of rites de passage, ends with repentance, confession, and peace: "I could even beg God's pardon this moment, for thinking ill of Him sometime or other." (p. 248) In Laurence's words one can almost equate inner freedom with growth. While Hagar fails to reach this inner freedom she is never a pathetic victim. Although she is too old and obdurate to change, she does come to understand herself – her pride, her fear, loneliness and her lack of freedom. At the end she recalls doing only two "truly free" acts, which she calls a Joke and a Lie. Clearly, Hagar refers to fetching the bedpan for the girl in her hospital room; and blessing Marvin, assuring him that he has been a better son than John and stands first in her affection. These two acts are altruistic, directed outwards in the effort to comfort another person.

Hagar's free acts are actually far more numerous. They include many small gestures in the closing chapters. Hagar gives her sapphire ring to her grand-daughter Tina. She forgives Murray for betraying her hiding place in the cannery. She thanks the clergyman, despised earlier, for singing in the hospital and tells Doris that she has done her good. This is not to say that Hagar's pride is banished. She calls herself unregenerate: "the same touchiness rises within me at the slightest thing." (p. 293)

Towards the end of the novel Hagar admits that she always wanted "simply to rejoice" (p. 292) But she never could do that because "pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touch. Oh my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years." (p. 292) *The Stone Angel* does not end in this revelation though it is the tragic climax for Hagar, the moment of truth for her and for the reader, the moment of a cathartic release. There is, in the short time left before her story ends, time and opportunity for her to take the steps towards restitution which she needs and to accept the evidence of love that she has always wanted. Marvin cannot rise above the hackneyed common place in speech, but Hagar, who always despised his inarticulateness as she hated his father's vulgarity of language, can now see through the words to the spirit and is, at last, able to rejoice.

A pause, and then Marvin replies.

"She's a holy terror," he says.

Listening, I feel it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness. (p. 305)

A strongly-marked sacramental pattern moves with benign irony through the novel. The spirit of the religion which Hagar had known only in an emptiness of form takes her through repentance and confession, from the prison of self to the moment of knowledge pointing towards freedom, and on to the simple but single acts of restitution which do give her a sense of freedom. And the pattern culminates as Hagar does lose her life to find it, in the splendid, strongly-marked symbols of the final lines—a fighting, dying, stubborn old woman, a glass of water, the cup of life, the grace of God: “I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There There And then...” (p. 308)

Life does not often offer us such a rounded completeness of pattern, though life does most strangely answer the demands of the will. Fortunately, there is art, opening up glimpses of the whole, burning away fear and pity to make places for acceptance, charity and the power to go on.

Symbolically, Hagar is, of course, a wanderer in the wilderness through her own willfulness. Like the biblical Hagar, the second wife of Bram Shipley, resents and despises the memory of the first one just as the biblical Hagar resents Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Bram Shipley, with his failure farm, is no patriarch—though sadly and ironically, he wishes to be one and hopes their first child will be a boy: “It would be somebody to leave the place to,” he said. “I saw him with amazement that he wanted his dynasty no less than my father had.” (p. 101) Hagar flees Bram and the farm and lives self-exiled with her son John.

Hagar is a tragic figure finally redeemed. But more than that she is real, with an energy of presence that does burst the frame it is held in, to communicate its power, its pathos and its vitality directly, like a blow or a sharp cry. She is also, as her story begins, grotesque, as the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, erected from pride and not from love. Hagar’s is a grotesquerie within the real, not beyond its bounds in fairy-tale. Hers is a distortion of normality, the form monstrous without its appropriate spirit; only with hard-won humility does she moderate from enormity to humanity. Patricia Morley rightly argues that, “Seeking freedom, Hagar forges more chains, seeking community she builds psychic walls. Her final self-knowledge accompanies the breaking of these bonds, as Hagar is released into love, death and the new life suggested by images of rebirth and transformation”. (Margaret Laurence: *The Long Journey Home*)

George Eliot spoke of the process of writing a novel as a movement towards conceiving “with that directness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense.” In her conception of Hagar and in her telling of Hagar’s story, Margaret Laurence has done just that—and her subject required the particular directness which Laurence commands best. Hagar exploited a talent that rushed to her creation with the flamboyant vigour and perception and completely answered the requirements of Hagar’s total reality.

George Woodcock calls Laurence a “Canadian equivalent to Tolstoy.” Both writers, Woodcock argues, have a panoramic sense of space and history, an ability to preserve lost times and worlds so that outsiders can imaginatively apprehend them. He argues: “... their characters are as impressive as their settings, and their best revelations are achieved not... by explicit statements of historic themes, but rather by the vivid, concrete yet symbolic presentation of crucial points of instinct in individual lives, such as... the moment in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* when the despised minister, Mr. Troy, sings the first verse of the Doxology to Hagar Shipley during her last days in hospital...” (*A Place to Stand On*)

Woodcock concludes that Hagar’s recognition of her need to rejoice and her inhibiting pride are intensely personal, yet at the same time one can generalize her situation into a description of the state of mind of a whole generation of English

speaking Canadians. To quote Patricia Morley again: "Hagar Shipley is the first in a series of memorable women. In five closely connected works of fiction Laurence presents universal concerns in terms of Canadian experience over four generations. She allows us to see into the hearts of her individual characters; their society, and ourselves." (*A Place to Stand On*)

To provide us an opportunity to peep into the psychic tumult of her protagonist Margaret Laurence opts for the first person narrative. It can be a limiting device in the hands of a lesser artist but Laurence uses it to the hilt as it provides her an opportunity to reveal to the reader more of Hagar than she knew herself, as her judgements about everything are so plainly and strongly biased. For the same purpose the flash-back method is employed. Laurence believed that the flash-back method suited an elderly protagonist who lives largely in the past. The chronological structuring of Hagar's memories provides clarity and unity to the novel and an immediacy to the past. A more pressing reason for depending on Hagar's voice is its poetic quality. Laurence admits "I finally came to the conclusion that even people who are relatively inarticulate, in their relationships with other people, are perfectly capable within themselves of perceiving the world in more poetic terms. So I let her have her way." ("Gadgetry or Growing...p.6)

2.3 THE STONE ANGEL AS VOLLENDUNGSROMAN

Vollendungsroman as defined by Constance Rooke is the novel of "completion" or "winding up." *The Stone Angel* is regarded as the central or prototypical example of the genre, for a number of reasons. One of the most distinguishing aspects of "Vollendungsroman, in *The Stone Angel* is the kind of alliance between the elderly character and the author—as language itself becomes the agent of affirmation," says Rooke. (*Crossing the River*. p.3)

A special intensity (resulting from the proximity to darkness) characterizes the Vollendungsroman. The writer's imagination is challenged by the prospect of the character's demise, and by the need to "capture" a life before it vanishes. Behind this, and quite apart from the question of the author's own age, is undoubtedly the spectre of the writer's own aging and prospective death. Writing is always an act directed against death; it may become that more specifically and more urgently when the writer's subject is old age. Thus, we feel strongly the need that Laurence feels to let her elderly protagonist speak "before [her] mouth is stopped with dark".

The act of speech operates in the Vollendungsroman in several ways. Broadly or metaphorically speaking it is all of the writing performed on the protagonist's behalf by the novelist; more literally, it includes the inner (silent) discourse of the protagonist; finally, of course, it is all speech performed out loud by the elderly protagonist. Speech of this most literal kind may be divided further. Often there is something that must be said to other characters in order to free them for their own lives; this is illustrated by Hagar's statement to Marvin that he has been "good to [her], always. A better son than John". (p.304) And it is typical of the Vollendungsroman that the truth of this crucial speech is gone. An imprecise formulation—even a lie, though Hagar speaks more truly than she knows—is not only preferable to silence, but all that can be hoped for. If Hagar fails "to speak the heart's truth", she fails in part because we all necessarily fail—and because language fails always. Still it is what we have. Through language, we communicate some portion or version of "the heart's truth" and so become visible, assuming a more or less reliable shape in one another's eyes—so that Marvin, in his turn, can remark to the nurse that his mother is "a holy terror", (p.304) and Hagar can feel this accolade as "more than [she] could reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness." (p.304) However imperfectly, Hagar and Marvin connect in

time through language and such moments have a heightened importance in the *Vollendungsroman*, where time is running out.

Hager and The Theme of Self- Alienation

It is also characteristic of the *Vollendungsroman* that the elderly protagonist is tormented by the memory of characters who have died before some vital message could be delivered or received. Thus, Hagar wants Bram to know she loved him and wants John to know that she regrets the plot to separate him from Arlene. And it is too late. But *The Stone Angel*, like other *Vollendungsromans*, supplies amelioration through delayed and displaced speech, as figures like Murray Lees appear to take the words that Hagar needs to give. None of this can change the damage she has done to others in the past; "Nothing can take away those years", as Hagar knows full well, unleashing the savage irony that she hears in the minister's words of comfort. Yet language can begin to repair the damage Hagar has done to herself. Speech acts, exchanged with surrogate figures, help her to see what might have been and what she is capable of being even now. They collapse time, even as they enforce its tragic necessity, and reveal to Hagar her continuing potential for connectedness in the human family. They point both to the past in which she might have spoken thus, and to the present in which she does.

Hagar thinks that she is "unchangeable, unregenerate. I go on speaking in the same way, always"; (p. 293) thus her problem with speech is as much with what she says as what she fails to say, and her problem is that in both ways she separates herself from others. Following this self-accusation, however, Hagar withdraws her dismissive remark about the minister- "We didn't have a single solitary thing to say to one another"- and admits to Doris that "He sang for me, and it did me good." (p. 293) Interestingly, the hymn that Hagar had requested of Mr. Troy is the one "that starts out all people that on earth do dwell", (p. 291) thus the "single solitary" state of alienation and failed speech is pierced by chords addressing all. The song here—as often in the *Vollendungsroman*—seems to bridge the gap between silence and speech, bringing into consciousness the individual's yearning for community. It propels Hagar into the kind of recognition which occurs most frequently for the elderly protagonist, a need to shake off the "chains within" and welcome joy.

Words that are delivered to surviving characters, messages that are routed to the dead through intermediaries (so that the elderly character may be delivered from the burden of silence or mistaken speech), talk in which the aged protagonist may exercise a freer version of the self—these are some of the speech acts that point toward affirmation in the *Vollendungsroman*. Always, they are imperfect or imprecise. But that is necessarily the case, since the *Vollendungsroman* negotiates between speech and silence, between the lived and un-lived life since desire is never satisfied. What seems to matter is that it be expressed.

Hagar's life has been more mistaken than most—her story more unspoken and misspoken—but the distance she feels between what her life has been and what it would have been is entirely typical of the *Vollendungsroman*. Constance Rooke has coined this German neologism for the novel of old age, of "completion" or "winding up," with a certain measure of irony, since a characteristic of these texts is the recognition that human projects are never completed. Time runs out, as pages do. Only rarely does such a text conclude with a ringing endorsement of what the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson refers to as the old person's "one and only life." *The Stone Angel*, in which Hagar is struggling desperately to change and grow, in which categorically she refuses to gloss over her mistakes and deprivation, is a typical case. Art here reflects and seeks to compensate for the incompleteness of a human life.

Simone de Beauvoir, however, in *The Coming of Age*, takes a very different view of the uses of the elderly in fiction: "If an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for ... Nothing that can happen to him is of any importance." (*Essays in*

honour of Margaret Laurence. p.210) Novels like *The Stone Angel* prove her wrong. But what is particularly striking in this statement is the notion that elderly protagonists cannot engage our interest if “dealt with in [their] subjective aspect.” For this is exactly the “aspect” of old age that contemporary fiction chooses to reveal. When the closed subject becomes an open book, when the mask of stereotypical old age is torn away and the icon stirs, when the elderly character in fiction is allowed to reveal herself as subject, we discover that indeed there is “development to be looked for.” In the case of *The Stone Angel*, that development is “looked for” by all—author, character, and reader.

The Stone Angel gives us the elderly protagonist from the inside. A cantankerous old woman, Hagar Shipley is an obstacle and a problem for her family; but we take her side to a remarkable degree, because we are given access to it. We see what Hagar says and does and the effect she has on others—and much of that we would judge harshly; but because Hagar is allowed to tell her own story, because we enter her consciousness and live there, we can respond to her more fairly. We learn to value her rich sensuality and the free play of her wit; we see the other side of the coin, the capacity for joy, all the positive qualities that have been so tragically denied in Hagar’s presentation of self to the world. We come to understand as well the social, familial, patriarchal, and puritanical—which have led her to this distortion. And that very pride which we deplore in its outer workings, as well as for Hagar’s sake, is revealed to us as a means of survival.

Constance Rooke argues that the subject of old age is a powerful one for other reasons too. The invisibility or marginalization of old people, their reduction to stereotype, their occupation of a zone behind the mask—all of this provide special impetus to one of the writer’s most crucial drives, which is to see other human beings clearly. The indignities suffered by the elderly—as their bodies betray them, as memory fails, as social power is stripped away and condescension mounts—may also stimulate the writer’s need to proffer dignity through art. Any reader of *The Stone Angel* will recall how Laurence moves us inexorably from a puerile assumption of the “we”-“Well, how are we today?” he inquires” (p.277)- to a truer sense of the tribulations of old people.

Questions such as these relate to the elderly person’s claim upon a writer’s empathy or compassion. But the elderly character is also attractive for a number of more ‘technical’ literary reasons. To begin with, she makes available to the writer nearly the whole span of a life history—as opposed to just that truncated, glibly predictive bit before the heroine decides whom to marry. She picks up the human story at a pivotal and richly dramatic point, when the evaluation of life seems most urgent, and when the old dramatic question of what comes next is most especially poignant. She may also function for the writer as a touchstone (and victim or champion) of social attitudes that have shaped our past and that operate still, even in a climate of radical revision. All of this, Hagar clearly does.

The Stone Angel is a prototypical example of the Vollendungsroman also in its extensive use of the most characteristic imagery of old age. Consider, for instance, the image of the house with which Laurence plays so elaborately, in using “tonehouse” as Aunt Doll’s surname (to forecast Hagar’s tenure as housekeeper in Mr. Qatley’s Stone House) and in having Marvin sell housepaint (to imply an interest in appearances, which Hagar forswears when she claims the weather beaten house at Shadow Point as her own). Laurence begins her manipulation of this image with the old woman’s characteristic fear of dispossession. The house is then developed as an image of the self, the societal construct and the body. What Hagar must do in preparation for her death is what Saul Bellow’s elderly heroine in “Leaving the Yellow House” and countless others must do. She must wean herself from that cocoon, that entrenched idea of the self, and “admit” the forces of nature. Understandably, she is afraid. Her fear of intruders in the house is the fear of death that Laurence explores in many strands of the novel’s imagery.

Other images that are typical of the *Vollendungsroman* include the sea (which is opposed to the house, as the site of dissolution and rebirth) and the transitional identification of Hagar as a gypsy (who makes her home in nature). Angels as figures poised between two worlds, as messengers and mediators—are also surprisingly common. Another is the mirror, which Laurence uses (again typically) in two opposing ways. On the one hand, she holds the mirror up to a literal and appalling truth—as Hagar sees in it “a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the skin with an indelible pencil” (p. 79)—and on the other hand, she permits Hagar to “feel that if [she] were to walk carefully up to [her] room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise [she] would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair...” (p. 42). In these examples (and others I might have chosen), the power of the image is unleashed by a sense of rich imagery particularly—as if the image had been minted just for Hagar—and by a sense of universality.

Perhaps the most common feature of the *Vollendungsroman* is the life review in which narrative time is divided between past and present. The past—in which the characteristic matter of the *Bildungsroman* is recapitulated—typically approached and controlled through the operation of the elderly protagonist’s memory. The present “mirrors” the past in a number of complex ways, as the protagonist’s most basic identity themes are both reasserted and deconstructed in the final phase of life. Very often—as happens at the point of John’s death—the narrative of the past will break off sharply, leaving a gap between that period and the narrative present. At such junctures the possibilities of life appear to close down, the seal of failure is imprinted, and a desirable version of the self seems unattainable. The elderly protagonist will often repress this juncture at which vitality was lost; its eventual approach, however, will be another kind of turning point—a courageous breaking of the seal, releasing her into a new sense of possibility.

If the character’s old age is purely a framing device—if little or no attention is paid to development in the present or to the experience of being old—then the novel is not by Rooke’s definition a *Vollendungsroman*. There are also a number of contemporary novels that focus primarily on the present time of elderly protagonists. Thus, a *Vollendungsroman* like Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori* or Paul Scott’s *Staying On* will contain elements of the life review without being structured by the process in the way that *The Stone Angel* clearly is. Generally however, a considerable portion of the narrative time is spent in the past. In this respect as in many others, *The Stone Angel* is a kind of template for the genre.

The life review is more than a structural device. It has philosophical implications that take us to the heart of the *Vollendungsroman* and the lives of elderly people. In 1963 one year prior to the appearance of *The Stone Angel*, Robert N. Butler published an essay called “The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged,” in which he posited “the universal occurrence in older people of an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one’s life.” He was arguing against the custom prevailing at the time, which was “to identify reminiscence in the aged with psychological dysfunction.” Butler suggests that “the life review Janus-like, involves death as well as looking back” and that “potentially [it] proceeds towards personality reorganization. Thus, the life review is not synonymous with, but includes reminiscence.” It includes also, as *The Stone Angel* does, a vital concern with the possibility of change.

Many of Butler’s insights and clinical observations are relevant to the case of Hagar. He remarks for instance, that “imagery of past events and symbols of death seem frequent in waking life as in the dreams suggesting that the life review is a highly visual process.” Inherently, then, the life review is a highly literary process as well; and Butler may be cited as supplying evidence for the interpenetration of life and art that helps to characterize the *Vollendungsroman*. The verisimilitude of Hagar’s “poetic” voice, as register of visually proliferating images—birds and eggs, for

example, images that we associate with death and captivity and rebirth—is vindicated by Butler’s work.

Butler’s essay is also concerned with the question of therapeutic value in the process of the life review. He rejects the position of certain psychotherapists that old people should not be encouraged to engage in life review, since they will only be devastated by their failures and their incapacity to repair them. He argues instead for the inherent value of “truth” and for the possibility of change at any point in the life cycle; he believes in the inevitability of the life review. Yet Butler acknowledges the risk of three kinds of people: “those who always tended to avoid the present and put great emphasis on the future... those who have consciously exercised the human capacity to injure others [and those who are] characterologically arrogant and prideful”. Although harsh and incomplete this might serve as a thumbnail sketch of Hagar Shipley. It sounds logical to agree with Constance Rooke’s final statement that life review has benefitted Hagar. She says, “Margaret Laurence, however would not be dissuaded any more than Hagar is herself. At risk in all these ways, Hagar profits nonetheless (and we profit) from her life review. She proceeds towards personality reorganisation.” (*Essays in honour of Margaret Laurence*. p.39)

2.4 SELF-ALIENATION OF THE ELDERLY AND THE STONE ANGEL

The portrayal of elderly characters as self-alienated is one of the major concerns for many modern writers. Rosalie Murphy Baun has examined Margaret Laurence’s fictional portrayal of women in *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angel*, *A Bird in the House* and argues that the women’s patterns of behaviour in old age are simply variations of a neurotic pattern of self-alienation. What Marcia Westcott identifies as a “core dependent character” which is gender-neutral in our culture, begins in childhood, and can continue indefinitely in a parent-child-parent cycle.

Karon Horney a Third Force psychologist in her famous work *Our Inner Conflicts* focuses largely upon three basic patterns of neurotic behaviour which the “core dependent character” can take—the complaint or dependent, the aggressive or domineering, and the detached. All three forms are found in Laurence’s fiction. For example, Mrs.Cameron, Rachel’s mother in *A Jest of God*, is a good example of an elderly woman in whom complaint (“moving toward”) tendencies dominate. Such a person frequently controls others through his or her need of them; he may take the stance that “You must love me, protect me, forgive me, not desert me, because I am so weak and helpless.” Hagar Shipley, Marvin’s mother in *The Stone Angel*, offers a good example of the aggressive type (“moving against”), who denies his or her softer feelings, abhors helplessness, and seeks independence or mastery. Hagar is a superb example of two varieties of the type which Horney identifies as the perfectionist and the arrogant-vindictive and is Laurence’s supreme achievement in characterization. Mrs.Macleod, Ewen’s mother Vanessa’s grandmother in *A Bird in the House*, offers an excellent example of the detached person (“moving away from”). Such a person feels a strong need for superiority and usually looks at those around him with condescension. He or she frequently suppresses emotion and realizes his/her need for superiority in a world essentially of isolation.

Laurence’s portrayal of these three elderly women and their families offers a bleak view of human potential and, more especially, of the mother-child relationship. Although Horney indicates quite clearly that an individual can become neurotic because of the neurotic elements of his or her society and culture—for example, the contradictions between competition and brotherly love or between “conspicuous consumption” and “the reality of limited economic resources,” she also feels that appropriate parenting (that is parenting which successfully struggles with the neurotic culture) could make a difference. In Laurence’s novels, it is obvious that the neurotic

character in the early childhoods of Mrs. Cameron, Grandmother Connor, and Hagar Shipley has made it impossible for them to offer such parenting.

Hager and The Theme of Self- Alienation

According to Horney, the greatest problem in character development occurs when a child has a "neurotic parent", one for example whose insecurity and vulnerability to the ideals and stresses of a competitive society create within the family itself the very conditions of the society and culture. Most destructive of all is the pattern of treating a child as a narcissistic extension of the parent's idealized self, a situation in which the child is made to feel, usually covertly, that his "right to existence lies solely in living up to the parents expectations, measuring up to their ambitions for him, enhancing their prestige, [or] giving them blind devotion." (*Self Analysis*. p.44)

By examining Hagar Shipley in the light of Karen Horney's work on neurosis, an attempt is made to focus on the neurotic manner in which she interacts, actually conflicts, overtly or covertly with her son, Marvin with whom she is living. It is important, however, to make clear from the beginning that in no way does Horney suggest that conflict in and of itself, whether it is clashes between ourselves and others or within ourselves, is neurotic. Rather, conflict occurs within and between all of us, the nonneurotic and the neurotic; within the neurotic personality, however, the conflict is distinctive and self-destructive.

The symptoms of an impoverished personality appear with great clarity in the children of Laurence's elderly heroines. However, the pretenses which Horney emphasizes are necessary for the neurotic personality—the pretense of love, the pretense of goodness, the pretense of interest and knowledge, the pretense of honesty and fairness, and the pretense of suffering—are most vivid in Laurence's elderly women.

At the opening of *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley is about ninety, an outrageous, difficult woman being cared for by her son Marvin and daughter-in-law, Doris. She has difficulty remembering what happens from one minute to the next and sometimes confuses events of the past with those of the present; she cries easily, screeches at her daughter-in-law with little or no cause, and is churlish or combative much of the time. In addition, she wets the bed and insists upon smoking in bed even though she frequently falls asleep with a burning cigarette; her arthritis makes her clumsy; and she suffers pain under her ribs, which is later diagnosed as cancer. At the time that she is experiencing these humiliations of old-age and inflicting them, without gratitude, upon her son and daughter-in-law she is "rampant with memory" that is, she relives, through memory, her entire life. In so doing, she recalls her great pride and her fear of emotion. She reviews the many times she has shown strength and control over others, the times she has refused to allow her emotions to show, and the times she has allowed "proper" appearances rather than genuineness or caring to rule her life. In her last days she realizes how pride has been her "wilderness" and fear her "demon". She has lost the two men she loved most in life through her pride: never did she allow her husband, Bram, to see the love and sexual attraction she felt for him, thereby contributing to his alcoholism and death; never did she allow her son John to live his own life until her interference actually led to his death. Hagar realizes in her last hours that she has never really lived, never simply rejoiced. Her life has been all pride and pretense, including many of the pretenses discussed by Horney.

Hagar's son Marvin, with his wife, has devoted the last seventeen years of his life caring for his elderly mother. He has served her in every way he could, cringing from the bickering and recriminations between her and his wife, feeling guilty about the great burden that his wife has to bear from both the physical needs and unkind attitude of his mother. At one point, as he realizes that his wife simply cannot continue to lift his mother when she falls, he is able for a short time to consider placing his mother in a home for the aged; but his "Hopeful desperation" that she will like the place succumbs quickly to his mother's refusal. As a child, Marvin had also tried to serve his mother well, doing his chores ably and hanging around her, fruitlessly hoping for

words of praise or affection. But he has never been important to his mother. Only in her last hours, when Hagar comes to realize something of the emotional desert her life has been, does she see Marvin as a loving, caring, responsible child begging for a blessing from a parent who has always ignored him. With this insight, Hagar blesses him, saying, "you have been good to me, always" (p.304) and she deliberately and caringly lies to him by adding that he has been "a better son than John", her favourite son. Thus, Hagar lifts from Marvin his sense of weakness and worthlessness, and he believes her. Who would tell a lie on her deathbed? A son whose impoverished personality with its neurotic dependency has struggled responsibly throughout a lifetime of hard work and little joy, Marvin is one of the luckier children in Laurence: he has had limited joy with his wife, Doris, and their children, Tina and Steven, and he receives his mother's blessing and release when she is ninety and he is in his sixties.

Examining Karen Horney's three basic patterns of neurotic behaviour with reference to the parent-child relationships created by Laurence in three of her works of fiction, is especially appropriate because of the very nature of neurotic trends. As Horney points out, the neurotic is highly dependent upon other people, whatever form his neurosis may have assumed. He depends upon people for moving toward, moving against, or moving away from. One could almost say that the parent-child relationship offers a particularly revealing (if unfortunate) laboratory for examining the variations of neurotic behaviour since the parent-child relationship, by definition, involves two people bound together by the physical and emotional needs of the younger. Laurence's fiction is also especially appropriate for examining such neurotic patterns because Laurence, in the words of John Moss, "celebrates life while lamenting the limitations placed upon it by personality." (*The Canadian Novel*) Laurence's fiction indicates quite clearly that the neurotic bonds established in childhood remain throughout life, even in a case like Marvin, who left home at seventeen, when Hagar was in her early forties, and lived away from her for thirty years. However, *The Stone Angel* also suggests that when the mother-figure has a strong personality like that of Hagar Shipley, the child's personality appears even more impoverished than that of the parent; and the child is certainly a less interesting fictional character than the parent. Hagar's discovery at the end that life's purpose is to rejoice—is ultimately Horney's definition of the goal of therapy—to create "wholeheartedness: to be without pretense, to be emotionally sincere, to be able to put the whole of oneself into one's feelings, one's work, one's beliefs". (*Our Inner Conflicts* p.242) But since it is the neurotic character—especially the grand dame of them all, Hagar—who holds the attention of readers, we cannot help being grateful for such neuroses, at least in fiction if not in life.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has taken up the discussion of three different yet interconnected aspects of *The Stone Angel*. The first part has studied in detail the complex but memorable personality of the protagonist Hagar Shipley. While highlighting the peculiar and distinguishing qualities of Hagar's character an effort has been made to establish how her ancestry and upbringing plays a vital role in making her extremely proud and a staunch believer in keeping up appearances. This belief has ruined her chances of enjoying freedom and joy within the framework of familial relationships even. Growth and self-knowledge are the two important aims of all major characters in Laurence's fiction. Hagar also, during her last days in the hospital, is blessed with the knowledge of her limitations and the strengths of others with whom she has interacted. She musters up the courage to view them as they are and admits that her own temperament has been her undoing.

Since Hagar Shipley is an old woman of ninety and she is the protagonist of the novel, the novel is discussed as a typical example of *Vollendungsroma* – a novel of

'completion' or 'winding up'. Another related aspect of the novel – the theme of self-alienation of the elderly has also been taken up for discussion.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Irascible:	susceptible to ire or anger, irritable.
Incontinent:	not restraining natural discharges or evacuations.
Restitution:	restoration
Amelioration:	to make better
Prototypical:	an original type or model
Truncated:	short, maimed
Recapitulate:	to go through the stages of one's life history
Template:	a mould shaped to the required outline from which workmen execute moulding.
Proliferating:	to grow by multiplication of parts.
Vindicated:	justified
Therapeutic:	healing, curative

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Establish how pride has been the undoing of Hagar Shipley.
2. *The Stone Angel* is Hagar Shipley's progress towards inner freedom. Discuss.
3. What are the distinguishing features of Vollendingsroman? Enumerate them with special reference to *The Stone Angel*.
4. Which type of neurotic personality does Hagar represent? Can you blame her ancestry and upbringing for it? Give reasons.

2.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 *THE STONE ANGEL*: A NOVEL OF AWAKENING

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *The Stone Angel*: A Novel of Awakening
- 3.3 *The Stone Angel*: The Religious Roots of the Feminine Identity Issue.
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Glossary
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is prepared with the purpose of discussing *The Stone Angel* as a novel of awakening and to analyse the novel with a view to establishing a connection between religious concepts and the issues related to female identity.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing : Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Carol Christ describes a common pattern in women's spiritual quests, which takes a distinctive form in the work of women writers. The first stage in the spiritual quest process is what Christ calls an "experience of nothingness," the second stage, is awakening. Awakening often occurs through the third stage, which she terms as "mystical identification", and frequently takes place in a natural setting. The last stage in the process Christ terms as "new naming of self and reality". Tracing this pattern in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* places Hagar Shipley's story in a strong tradition of writing by women: the novel of awakening. Here readers attempt to understand the female protagonists as they attempt to understand themselves.

3.2 *THE STONE ANGEL*: A NOVEL OF AWAKENING

The Stone Angel explores several ideas common to the novel of awakening: the survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality, and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present. Laurence's achievement is that she makes her protagonist's awakening contingent upon her ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother, and that the awakening in *The Stone Angel* evolves in the consciousness of a ninety-year-old woman.

The awakening process that Christ describes begins in an experience of nothingness. According to Christ, women experience nothingness in their own lives, especially in their relationship with men. That is certainly true of Laurence's protagonist Hagar Currie Shipley. Early in *The Stone Angel*, Hagar cries, "Oh, my lost men. No, I will not think of that." (p.6) But Hagar does not have as much control over her thoughts as she would like. She tries to come to terms with her failed relationships with the men in her life: her father, her two brothers, her husband, and her two sons.

Christ says that women also experience nothingness in the values that have shaped their lives. Again that is true in Hagar's case. Because her mother dies when Hagar is born, Hagar's life is shaped and dominated by the patriarchal and materialistic values that she inherits from her stern Scottish father Jason Currie. Laurence has admitted that *The Stone Angel* was an attempt to understand her grandparent's generation. Hagar's father represents the best and worst of that generation: an unbending authoritarian, he is afraid to show love, easily angered, bigoted, ambitious, hard-working, dutiful, proud, and strong. From him, Hagar inherits all those attributes, along with the Scottish clan motto that she lives by all her life: "Gainsay who Dare." (p. 15) From him she also inherits her hatred of even the appearance of weakness. One of her earliest memories is of being beaten by her father and her reaction to the punishment: "I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged." (p. 9) She also recalls her father's response: "You take after me.... You've got backbone." (p. 10) Hagar also inherits her father's brains. Once she overhears her father talking about her: "Smart as a whip, she is, that one." (p. 14) Hagar does not need to hear the end of the sentence, and neither do her brothers.

In her first mention of her brothers, Hagar says, "My brothers took after our mother." (p. 7) She describes them as "graceful uninspired boys." (p. 7) Implicit here is the damaging association between women and weakness that Hagar makes throughout most of her life. The same association is implicit in her opening description of the stone angel which guards her mother's grave: "in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one." (p. 3) It is this association that damages her relationship with her brothers. When her brother Dan is dying of pneumonia, Matt, her other brother, tries to talk the teenaged Hagar into wearing their mother's shawl to comfort Dan. Hagar refuses. "But all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much a part of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her—was beyond me." (p. 25) Hagar wants to do what Matt asks but, as she puts it, she is "unable to bend enough." When she rejects her mother's weakness, she becomes like her stone image. Hagar loses the fullness of her potential self when she cuts herself off from others.

It is this inability to bend that destroys her relationship with her husband, Bram Shipley. Hagar is attached to Bram because of what he represents to her: rebellion against her father's authority and middle class values, and a response to the natural world. It is significant that the first time Hagar sees Bram at a dance she thinks he looks like a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face she also "reveled in his fingernails with crescents of ingrown earth that never met a file." (p. 45) She is shocked when during their first dance, he presses his groin against her, yet she accepts his request for another dance. It is clear that Hagar is attracted to Bram's earthy sexuality, but it is also clear that the values she inherits from her father and her training in the cult of true womanhood will not allow her to acknowledge that attraction. Her Currie inheritance and finishing-school training cause her to denigrate the very qualities in Bram that she is drawn to. When her father refuses to have anything to do with her marriage to Bram, or with her, Hagar is at first certain that he "would soften and, yield, when he saw how Brampton Shipley prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammer." (p. 50) Her ideas about love, like her ideas about everything else, are shaped by her alienating background. If she imagined Bram as a rugged Indian when they first met, in the next instant she "imagined him rigged out in a suit of grey, soft as a dove's breast-feathers." (p. 45) Her romantic conceptions about love prevent her from recognizing her true feelings for her husband: "He had a banner over me for many years. I never thought it love, though, after we wed. Love, I fancied, must consist of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets, not like the things he did sprawled on the high white bedstead that rattled like a train." (p. 80) Hagar's attempts to tame Bram are futile and destructive. Their battle of wills hurts him, her, and their relationship. She is more successful at taming her own response to her husband. "It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and

I made certain that the trembling was all inner I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead." (p. 81)

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A Novel of
Awakening*

To show response would be to accept being a woman. Denying her womanliness also means denying her sexuality. Her success at controlling herself is just as destructive as her attempts to control Bram. When she feels tenderness for her husband, as she does when he loses a prized horse, she refuses to express it, seeing such feelings as weak and womanly. The same intolerance of weakness, prevents her from telling Bram of her fears when she finds that she is pregnant. At several points in their relationship, Hagar pulls away when they have chances to pull together. When Bram takes her to the hospital to deliver their son, for example, instead of sharing Bram's excitement, Hagar feels ashamed to be seen with him.

It is concern about what others think, her pride, that causes Hagar to leave Bram, just as defiance of what others think, and her pride, caused her to leave her father and marry Bram. When she leaves him to support herself and her youngest son, John, by becoming a housekeeper for a rich man on the coast, she proves her strength, her independence and her ability to survive. But leaving Bram levies a heavy emotional toll. Hagar's memories of him suggest that not only did she miss him in her bed, but she also missed his recognition and respect of her. Looking back, she thinks "he was the only person close to me who ever thought of me by my name, not daughter, nor sister, nor mother, not even wife, but Hagar, always." (p. 80) That Bram is the only one who calls her by her name is important. It gives her a sense of self which her lack of a relationship with her mother has denied.

Hagar's unexpressed, unacknowledged love for Bram affects her relationship with her youngest son, John. Despite hints in her narrative that John is very much like his father, Hagar insists on seeing him as a Currie through and through. She even gives him one of her prized possessions, her Currie clan pin. He asserts his allegiance to Bram by trading it for a knife. John's similarity to Bram is clearest in his relationship with Arlene Simmons. He assumes that Arlene is attracted to him for the same reason that Hagar is initially attracted to Bram, because she is not supposed to be. They first get together at a dance, like Bram and Hagar did. John gets drunk, like his father, who drank himself to death, and Arlene brings him home. When John learns that Arlene took care of him, he grins, and Hagar describes it as "the same distorted mouth as I'd seen before on someone else." (p. 199) When Arlene defends John by denying that he is like Bram, Hagar gets angry at the implied criticism of her dead husband. It is clear, except to Hagar, that her preference for the younger son is based on his resemblance to his father.

Just as John resembles the young Bram, Arlene is like the young Hagar. Remembering Arlene taking care of the drunken John, Hagar observes, "She was a very practical girl in some ways." (p. 198) When Arlene's parents lose their money during the Depression she is proud of her own self-sufficiency when she gets a job. But unlike Hagar, Arlene is able to express her feelings for the man she loves. When Hagar overhears them making love, it is clear to her that Arlene is enjoying herself, and that is when Hagar takes steps to stop them from marrying. Hagar's reaction to John's marriage is similar to her father's reaction to hers. She arranges with Arlene's parents to send Arlene away. When John learns of Arlene's departure he gets drunk, drives with Arlene on the railway bridge and kills them both in a self-destructive game with a freight train. It is not until Hagar goes through her process of awakening that she is able to come to terms with her guilt over her part in John and Arlene's death.

Whereas Hagar was too protective of John, she almost ignores her elder son, Marvin. While she insists that the wild John is a Currie through and through, it is the hard-working Marvin who seems most like Hagar's father. As John tells her, "You always bet on the wrong horse... Marvin was your boy, but you never saw that." (p. 237) It is clear from Hagar's memories that Marvin would have done anything to win her approval. "He was a serious and plodding little boy, and seemed to take to chores

naturally. But when he'd finished them, he'd hang around the kitchen waiting for approval or at least acknowledgement." (p. 112) "But he never wins them from Hagar. The same pattern emerges when he leaves to join the war. Hagar feels a pang of tenderness: "I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him, against all reason and reality, not to go. But I did not want to embarrass both of us, nor have him think I'd taken leave of my senses." (p. 129) Once again, Hagar's pride comes between her and those she loves. As she says, "the moment eluded us both." (p. 130) The relationship between Hagar and Marvin doesn't improve when he and his wife, Doris, move in with Hagar to take care of her. Living with an aging and irascible Hagar makes life difficult for all of them, as Hagar herself realizes: "I have lived with Marvin and Doris—or they have lived in my house, whichever way one cares to phrase it—for seventeen years. Seventeen—it weighs like centuries. How have I borne it? How have they?" (p. 37) When Hagar's fall and memory lapses convince them that they can no longer care for her, they investigate the possibility of putting her in Silverthreads, a nursing home. Hagar's pride and self-reliance will not permit this and an attempt to stop it leads to her awakening.

As Hagar thinks about her "lost men," it becomes clear that her relationships with them are marked by failure; by her failure to understand those she loves, and by her failure to express her feelings so that they could understand her. Clearly, Hagar experiences the "nothingness" in her relationships with the men in her life that Christ sees in women's novels of awakening, but even more damaging is the nothingness she experiences in her relationships with women, symbolized by the stone angel. *The Stone Angel* opens with a scene that connects the imagery associated with the mother figure and the imagery associated with the natural world. The novel begins with a description of the stone angel which dominates the small prairie town of Manawaka, and the whole novel: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty." (p. 3)

The stone angel is an emblem of the guilt which Hagar feels for the fact that her birth caused her mother's death, for the weakness that she associates with her mother, and for the power she associates with her father. The mother herself is an emblem and a victim of the colonial system. Yet this image is all Hagar has had for her desire for the mother, her need to be protected, and her pain at her mother's suffering characterize her childhood. Hagar stares at the stone angel's blind eyes, but never sees herself reflected there. Traditional accounts of psychological development argue that the child acquires a sense of self from the nurturing gaze of its mother-figure, grows away from her into an independent being, and goes on to master the world outside, symbolized by the father. The mother figure represents the first external mirror, eventually internalized, into which the girl-child looks to discover her identity. *The Stone Angel* provides a striking version of the absence of a mirroring bond and its painful effects on the heroine. Hagar's life story is the narrative of a subject's painful inability to belong to a place in any secure way, to belong to a larger community until she can come to terms with her image of the mother and with her own role as a mother.

Hagar seems to suffer from what Adrienne Rich calls matrophobia: "the fear not of one's mother or motherhood but of becoming one's mother... the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted." (*Of Women Born*, p. 235) Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull towards her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely. Hagar exhibits the dread that Rich mentions when she refuses to wear her mother's shawl to comfort her dying brother. She also exhibits the debilitating effects of matrophobia that Rich describes in the following terms: "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become

individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother's and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery." (*Of Women Born*. p.236)

Clearly, the stone angel represents the mother as martyr and Hagar performs the kind of radical surgery which Rich fears. She fits Rich's description of the motherless woman: "the motherless woman may also react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may feel uneasy with equals, particularly women." This is certainly true of Hagar, whose fear of the female and the inability to accept her own womanhood lead to decidedly unflattering images of women in the first half of the novel. Doris is an "unwilling hen," (p.36) Bram's daughters are like "lumps of unrendered fat", (p.56) the old women at Silverthreads are "ewes," (p.98) Although Hagar needs the sense of safety which an acknowledged identification with her mother and other women might confer, the death of her mother and her fear of becoming her, bars her from this feeling of unity and dooms her to a sense of fragmentation, which is reflected in her opening description of the angel and its surroundings. In her opening description of the Manawaka cemetery, Laurence sets up several oppositions that will divide Hagar from herself and from those she loves, especially Bram. The clearest opposition is between the foreign peony and the native cowslip. Hagar remembers "the funeral-parlour perfume of the planted peonies, dark crimson and wallpaper pink, the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves." (p.4) This recollection contrasts sharply with her memories of the cowslips.

"They were tough-rooted, these wild and gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at the cemetery's edge torn out by loving relatives to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized, for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree." (p.5)

Hagar's disdain for the imported peonies and her respect for the native cowslips suggest her ambivalence about the domestication of the prairie which Kolodny discusses in *The Land Before Her*. This passage could be read as a critique of the pioneer experience, an emblem of one woman's struggle with the conflicting values of domesticity and respect for the natural environment. Several contrasts are suggested in the opening scenes of the novel: death-life, artificial-natural, conscious-unconscious, civilization-nature, repression-passion, present-past, order-disorder, Currie-Shipley. Since all Hagar ever knew was the separation and fragmentation suggested by these binary oppositions, she is condemned to repeat them in all of her relationships. The lack of a bond between mother and daughter results in a painful psychological bondage from which Hagar cannot free herself until her awakening in the western Canadian landscape.

According to Christ, as a result of experiencing nothingness, the female protagonists "question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of a deeper source of power and value." (*Diving Deep and Surfacing*. p.13) Hagar's memories can be seen as an attempt to understand her life, and they help prepare her for the transformation she undergoes at Shadow Point. Like her marriage to Bram, Hagar's trip to the abandoned cannery on the edge of the ocean represents her rebellion against authority, against Doris and Marvin and their decision to place her in the Silverthreads nursing home. As Hagar plots her escape to Shadow Point, her defiance is clear: "They are greatly mistaken if they think I will bend meekly and never raise a finger. I have taken matters into my own hands before, and can again, if need be." (p.139)

Hagar's trip to Shadow Point is also like her marriage to Bram in that it represents her repressed response to the natural world. At Shadow Point, Hagar gets in touch with external nature and with her own. She goes there because she is drawn to its quiet

beauty: "I like this green blue-ceilinged place, warm and cool with sun and shade where I am not fussed at. Perhaps I have come here not to hide but to seek." (p. 192-93) What Hagar finds at Shadow Point is her own repressed response to the natural world as opposed to the domestic values that she has used to keep herself in check for so many years. This change is signaled when she replaces her old lady hat with the dead June bugs she finds in the abandoned cannery: "I take off my hat it's hardly suitable for here, anyway, a prim domestic hat sprouting cultivated flowers. Then with considerable care I arrange the Jade and copper pieces in my hair." (p. 216) Pleased with the effect, Hagar imagines herself "queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs." (p. 216) Hagar's coronation is in keeping with her comparison of herself to Keats' Meg Merrilies.

Old Meg she was a gypsy,
And lived upon the moors;
Her bed it was the brown heath turf,
And her house was out of doors. (p. 151)

Hagar's house at the cannery, like Meg's is essentially "out of doors". Under these conditions, Hagar's usual concern with protective boundaries is suspended. Like the house, Hagar is open to the natural world, and her openness is signified by her identification with Meg. According to Helen Buss, Meg also represents Hagar's openness to a new view of womanhood: "coming to terms with feminine values is largely accomplished for her through her identification of her womanhood with the figure of Meg Merrilies." Buss points out that Meg represents the "woman outside the civilized order that Hagar needs to touch in herself." Meg is also "brave as Margaret Queen" and "Tall as Amazon" thus representing a womanly strength based on a female tradition rather than a denial of femininity. According to Buss, "Hagar's chart of brave old Meg gives her a vision of female strength that she has previously lacked." (*Mother and Daughter Relationships*... p. 17)

Christ argues that Hagar's awakening takes place in a natural setting and it is presaged by a storm. Since the ocean is the "matrix of creation" in literature, it often represents a desire to return to that "pool of darkness" that is associated with women. The ocean represents surrender, release but also rebirth, a cleansing baptismal plunge. This water imagery represents a condition absolutely opposed to the stony paralysis of the angel. While listening to the soothing sounds of the sea, Hagar does plunge into the depths of her memories with the help of Murray Ferney Lees, an agent for Dependable Life Assurance. Christ notes that in women's spiritual quest literature, the awakening often resembles a conversion experience. There are certainly religious overtones to the scenes between Hagar and Lees. They share a jug of wine and tell each other their confessions. Religion figures prominently in Lees's story, and he tells it in a language reminiscent of an itinerant preacher which is appropriate since he comes from a long line of circuit riders. The confession/sermon which he delivers to Hagar seems tailor-made for her. As Constance Rooke points out, Lees's story is essentially Hagar's "where the chief villains are a concern for appearances and denial of sexuality, and where the catastrophe involves the loss of a son." (*A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel*... p. 31)

Laurence emphasizes the importance of the night that Hagar and Lees spend together in the abandoned cannery by making it the nexus of her dual plots. As she listens to Mr. Lees's tragedy in the present, her memories take her to John's death in the past. Since Hagar was so traumatized by seeing all that she loved destroyed, it is no wonder that she is compelled to repeat it. Lees's confession moves her to make her own, but it is not until he responds to it that she realizes that for the first time in her life, she had spoken her feelings out loud. Her reaction is uncharacteristic, "I am not sorry I have talked to him, not sorry at all, and that's remarkable." (p. 253) They discuss their anger about their senseless losses and then Hagar describes the effect of their revelations: "We sit close together for warmth, both of us, leaning against the boxes. And then we slip into sleep." (p. 246) When Hagar awakes she feels the effects of spending two nights in the open and Lees's cheap wine. She is sick and confused. In

her confusion she mistakes Lees for her lost son, and tells him that she won't come between John and Arlene. Lees pretends to be John and forgives her. This allows Hagar to forgive herself. At Shadow Point, Hagar comes to terms with the image of the mother on two levels: the image of Meg Merrilies supplants the image of woman as victim which Hagar has carried with her since the death of her mother, and her confession to Lees allows her to confront her own failure as a mother. Her journey to Shadow Point is also a journey into that part of her past, her failure as a mother, that she has been trying to avoid remembering and finally, a journey into acceptance. Her experiences at Shadow Point force Hagar to revise her notion of what being a woman means.

It is through Lees that Hagar achieves the "mystical identification" that Christ cites as a characteristic of women's novels of awakening. The night she spends with him prepares her for what Christ terms "a new naming of self and reality that articulates the new orientation to self and world achieved through the awakening." (*Diving Deep and Surfacing*, p. 22) While Hagar does not become a sweet old lady overnight, the effects of her experience with Lees are almost immediately apparent. Her first reaction is anger when she finds that Lees has betrayed her hiding place to Marvin and Doris. When Doris tells her that Lees has saved her life, Hagar is annoyed and amused, "This ridiculous statement makes me laugh, but then, looking into this strange man's eyes, an additional memory returns, something more of what he spoke to me last evening, and I to him, and the statement no longer seems so ridiculous. Impulsively, hardly knowing what I am doing, I reach and touch his wrist." (p. 253)

Hagar, who always flinches from human contact, touches him because he has touched her. He has saved her life.

Signs of Hagar's awakening are numerous in the last weeks of her life. While symbols of frozen womanhood, especially the stone angel, dominate the early chapters of the novel, the last two chapters feature images of women, both patients and nurses, as nurturer. As Buss points out, "we may measure Hagar's growth in her last days by her changing attitudes towards women, her increasing ability to receive mothering love and offer love in return Hagar begins a process whereby she allows other women to touch her life." (*Mother and Daughter Relationships*, p. 12) One of the most significant signs of her awakening is that Hagar, who has never been able to form attachments with women, becomes part of the women's community in the hospital where she spends her last days. Initially, she complains to Marvin about the noise and lack of privacy in the women's ward, but when he arranges for her to be moved to a semi-private room, she realizes that she will miss the other women, and the dialogues that they carry on in their dreams. The night cries in the women's hospital ward express their shared psychic field. Their mental barriers are permeable and their sleeping conversation incorporates all of the women's psychic lives.

Another sign of her awakening is Hagar's relationship with two young women—Sandra Wong, the teenager who shares her new room, and Doris's daughter, Tina. Hagar, who cannot think of anything that she has done to help someone else, gets out of her own bed, though she is in great pain, to get a bedpan for her young roommate. This scene is small, but important, for Hagar is able to define herself in a new way so that being a woman does not mean becoming her mother, retaining all the old connections with weakness, assuming automatically the outdated passive roles. Hagar's changing view of womanhood is reflected in her identification with her granddaughter. In Buss's view, Hagar's "gentle feelings towards Tina signal a new stage in her life, one that is to bring her closer to the mother and the values represented by that figure." Constance Rooke argues that Hagar's reconciliation with the image of the mother signifies a connection between four generations of women. According to Adrienne Rich, "Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter from women to women across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness." (*Of Women Born*, p. 246) Hagar comes to realize that she has been wandering in the wilderness, and her gift of the rings is her attempt to pass on the love, confirmation, and example which she lacked.

The gesture involves not destruction of the "mother" but rather a confrontation with and an incorporation of the matriarchal power to nurture.

The most significant sign of Hagar's growth in the novel comes in its most famous passage, when she faces some difficult truths about herself. "Every good joy I might have held, in my man or child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear." (p.292)

Throughout the novel Hagar is, in effect, reading her own life; in this passage she realizes that she is the author. Although this passage has received a lot of discussion from Laurence scholars, no one except Christ has noticed Hagar's emphasis on her sense of loss as a woman and a mother and her recognition that this loss is tied to her ability to respond to her natural surroundings and caused by the pride and fear of feminine weakness which she inherited from her father. In speaking "the heart's truth", Hagar achieves both a reconciliation with the feminine and a new sense of her own strength as a woman. By facing the stone angel which she has become, Hagar gets in touch with her life giving forces. Hagar looks Medusa's Stone Angel in the eye. Instead of being turned to stone, she is released into the world of feeling away from the frozen rage which Medusa represents. Facing the truth about herself allows her to speak it. When Marvin ask her how she is, she is set to lie, but instead she tells him, "I am frightened Marvin I am so frightened." (p.303) Even more difficult is the lie she tells him that he has been a better son to her than John. Hagar considers her final mothering of Marvin a victory and Buss explains why she is right:

When we consider the distance she has had to reach out to find the mother and the scant hand-holds her society offered her in her search we may be inclined to agree with her assessment of victory, and conclude that Laurence's achievement has not been in her portrayal of isolation but in her portrayal of the feminine search for relatedness despite all the forces of isolation. (*Mother and Daughter Relationships*...p.30)

When she leaves her room, Hagar overhears Marvin discussing her. It is one of the most moving passages in the novel: "She's a holy terror," (p.304) he says. Hagar is a holy terror to the end. In the last scene of the novel, she characteristically refuses to let the nurse help her drink a glass of water and insists on holding it in her own hands, just as she had held her life in her own hands. *The Stone Angel* ends with Hagar triumphantly drinking the water and then the words "And then". (p.308) As W.H. New points out, there are several ways to read this ending. In a novel shaped by Hagar's memory, "And then" could mean "at that time in the past," a final expression of the past imposing itself on the present. Or "And then" could mean "on the other hand" an expression of an alternative possibility. But I prefer to read "And then" as "next" an expression of continuity. It seems fitting that a novel that begins with death, that has at its center an awakening that places it in a long tradition of writing by women, and that attempts to explore the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, should end countering finality with regeneration. That Hagar's recognition of herself as a woman coincides with her own death is not only the tragedy of restricted choices. It is also her triumphant assumption of the female and of the painful but liberating comprehension of it.

3.3 *THE STONE ANGEL: THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE FEMININE IDENTITY ISSUE*

The major contention of many Liberationists including Mary Days, the author of *Beyond God the Father*, is that a major factor in preventing women from achieving a genuine sense of identity has been the "dominant male" philosophy embedded in

Judaean-Christian Theology. Accordingly women are urged to expose the sexual politics inherent in the Bible and to construct a new "theology" based upon matriarchal cults and upon the real experiences articulated by contemporary liberated women. Evelyn J. Hinz has insightfully explored the connection between religious issues and female identity in *The Stone Angel*. While doing so she has also questioned many of the premises and conclusions of the feminists.

The Stone Angel with its flash back technique is designed to provide the causes of Hagar's present loneliness, or gender alienation, and above all her fear of death. Though played out on sociological, psychological, and histo/cultural levels, all of the protagonist's problems are shown to stem from the religious climate in which she has been raised. Thus Laurence, in a seemingly feminist fashion, dramatizes the extent to which religious ideology permeates even secular aspects of human existence.

Hagar could be described as the damaged product of the Judaean-Christian education that emphasizes mental/male talents. This tradition is made clear through the name – specifically the initials – of her prime mentor, her father, Jason Currie. Similarly, though Hagar's relationship with her father could be studied as a modern version of the Electra Complex, her sense that her husband has committed a sacrilege when he urinates on the front steps of her father's store suggests the religious implications of the episode and so prevents any simple Freudian interpretation of her response.

Or again, if what has prevented Hagar's acceptance of her own femininity has something to do with the biological fact that her mother died in giving her birth and with the culturally upheld ideal of slim, virginal female, these too are shown to have their roots in the Judaean-Christian tradition. Her religious role models are her mother's monument, an "angel of pure white marble", and the sisterly Madonna of Michelangelo's *Pieta* – the latter being iconographically evoked when Hagar refuses to hold her dying brother and to drape him and herself in their mother's shawl.

Finally, if Hagar's sexual prudery and inability to articulate her delight in carnal love are symptomatic of the Victorian ethos of her time, Laurence also traces the problem to the spiritual orientation of Christianity. Thus, it is in the context of her recollection of the line "His banner over me was love" (p. 80) that Hagar in retrospect acknowledges the way in which she – like the commentators who allegorized the erotic Song of Solomon – refused to let her husband sense her sexual response.

Yet to see *The Stone Angel* purely as a *Dalysque* critique would be to miss Laurence's equal concern with the implications of the decline of the Judaean-Christian tradition. If Jason Currie's initials suggest the Saviour, for example, his first name also allies him with the questor for the golden fleece. His donations to the church proceed from no religious piety but rather from a desire to broadcast his financial superiority. For him, the importance of the angel tombstone is that it had been bought "at terrible expense" and that of all the angels in the cemetery it was "the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest." (p. 3) Therefore, if like his classical namesake he sacrifices the female for his own interest, he also represents the materialization of spiritual values.

Similarly, far from it being her father's use of religious authority to sanction his notions of dominance, it is his lack of a sense of hierarchy that bothers Hagar. Recalling how in church the congregation sang the psalm "unto the hills around do I lift up/My longing eyes" to "God the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made," (p. 16) Hagar continues: "Auntie Doll was always telling us that father was a God-fearing man. I never for a moment believed it, of course. I couldn't imagine Father fearing anyone, God included, especially when he didn't even owe his existence to the Almighty. God might have created heaven and earth and the majority of people, but father was a self-made man, as he himself had told us often enough." (p. 17)

Conversely, Hagar's real tragedy lies in her "feminist" confusion of spiritual and secular authority figures. Equating God and her father, she stops going to church

because of the way she feels her husband has disgraced her in the father's eyes: "I preferred possible damnation in some comfortably distant future, to any ordeal then of peeking or pitying eyes. But now when time has folded in like a paper fan, I wonder if I shouldn't have kept on going. What if it matters to Him after all, what happens to us." (p. 90')

Another factor to call into question regarding the feminist position is that what bothers Hagar about Christianity is not its "masculinity" as much as its "effeminacy." Here Laurence seems to be suggesting that the new Testament constitutes a decline from the Old. Hagar's husband is also a Christ figure—like Jesus, he was "born in a barn" and although his "feminine" association with the earth strikes a sympathetic cord in Hagar, it is also his lack of masculine assertiveness that is responsible for the failure in their relationship. This recognition comes to him in his last delirious moments when he muses: "That Hagar—I should have licked the living daylights out of her, may be, and she'd have seen I could. What d'you think? Think I should of?" (p. 173) Hagar's response in turn is "I could not speak for the salt that filled my throat and for anger" (p. 173) —not anger at her husband for such a male chauvinist statement, but anger over the realization of how different things might have been if Bram had been a stronger mate.

Furthering her critique of the effeminacy of the New Testament and its degeneracy, moreover, is Laurence's characterization of the surrogate God figure, the minister, who, Hagar's very "religious" (p. 38) daughter-in-law feels will bring the old woman "comfort" in her last days. Far from evidencing any "Trojan" qualities, the Reverend speaks for prayer and comfort, all in a breath, as though God were a kind of feather bed or spring filled mattresses. Not only is modern Christianity too soft, finally, it is also essentially too materialistic:

Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelation says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of pearl and topaz, like a gigantic chunk of costume jewellery. Saint John of Patmos can keep his sequined heaven, or share it with Mr. Troy, for all I care, and spend eternity in fingering the gems and telling each other gleefully they are worth a fortune. (p. 120)

Yet what is ultimately most problematic about the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as Laurence sees it, is its egocentricity and the concept of individual uniqueness. To emphasize this point, at the moment of Hagar's greatest sense of loneliness, Laurence has her protagonist ponder the twin issues of identity and the fear of death: "Hard to imagine a world and me not in it. Will everything stop when I do? Stupid old baggage, who do you think you are? Hagar. There's no one like me in this world." (p. 250)

Accordingly, one of Laurence's major strategies in *The Stone Angel* is to evoke biblical prototypes for Hagar, whereby she disproves her protagonist's claims to uniqueness at the same time that she demonstrates that the Bible is merely the Judaeo-Christian rendition—or "signature"—of mythic or eternally recurring experiences. Just as the biblical Hagar was the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, taken by him because his first wife, Sarah was childless, so Laurence's Hagar, who likens herself to "Pharaoh's daughter", is the second wife of Bram, whose first wife, Clara, had provided him with no male heirs. Just as a key episode in the Abraham story is Jehovah's command that he sacrifice his son, so Hagar is subjected to a test of faith when she watches Bram one day "cut a slab of waxen honey and hold it out" to their son, who opens his mouth, afraid to do otherwise, and stands stock still and white, while the honeyed butcher knife rams in ... "offering sweetness on a steel that in another season slit pigs' carcasses." (p. 125)

In turn, with a view to denying chronology — which is the historical equivalent of separateness — Laurence also finds a precedent for Hagar in the succeeding biblical

generation: just as Isaac's wife, Rebecca, helped her son, Jacob, to cheat his brother out of his birthright, so Hagar wants her second son, John to be the true heir of her father's line. Similarly, to demonstrate the universal and therefore non-sex-differentiated nature of archetypal experience, Laurence does not limit Hagar's prototypes to women. Bereft of everything, faced with the seemingly unjust ways of God, constipated Hagar is like "Job in reverse".

Most important of all, however, are the variations that Laurence plays on the story of Jacob and the angel, by which Hagar becomes identified not only with another masculine type but also with the spirit of Jehovah, so Hagar must realize that her identity crisis stems not from secular issues but from religious ones – from "the lack of a proper foundation garment" in a metaphorical sense. On the other hand, she must come to realize that she is the antagonistic force in her relationship with her son John. As he tries to straighten the toppled angel in the graveyard, she compares him to Jacob "wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no." (p. 179) Rather it is her other son, Marvin, who plays this role, gripping her hand with all his strength, and bargaining, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And I see that I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him." (p. 304)

In contrast to feminists who argue that the Bible has absolutely nothing to say to women, *The Stone Angel* argues that it is only the Judaeo-Christian "signature" that is problematic. Nor would Laurence appear to agree with those who argue categorically that what women need is a religion which reverses the Judaeo-Christian alignment of pride and self-assertion with sin and conversely of self-sacrifice with virtue. To the exact contrary, when Hagar explicitly connects her situation with that of her biblical prototype, it is precisely in terms of hubris and to the extent to which she has internalized the egocentric value system of a monotheistic deity: "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched." (p. 292)

"Nothing can take away those years," Hagar concludes, inquiring into the guilt she feels for the love she has withheld, but with Laurence pointing to what Hagar has missed most of all is her essentially Protestant upbringing: namely, rituals of atonement and exorcism. To provide these is Laurence's purpose in having Hagar escape to an old fishy cannery where she encounters a seedy "life assurance" salesman just as Laurence herein recovers the pagan or Dionysian figure of the redeemer and his cults which lie beyond or have degenerated into the more Apollonian Christian signature. Significantly, the episode takes the form of a descent to "Shadow Point", which would seem to imply both that it is not consciousness-raising but lowering that modern women need, and that such lowering needs to have a religious dimension.

Evocative of a shift from logos to eros, Christian to pagan, the episode begins when Hagar removes her hat and adorns herself with June bugs and rowanberries. And it is in this maenadic attire that she is found by Murray Ferney Lees, himself fleeing in scapegoat fashion from two dogs who would "have torn [him] to pieces." (p. 222) In keeping with his surname, Lees produces a jug of wine and, with Hagar making her offering of soda biscuits, the two enjoy their "Eucharistic Banquet." Lees then tells her of the "nothing meek" lusty-singing form of early Christian evangelicalism he had practiced and of how in this spirit he had met his wife and come to understand the divine ecstasy of sex: "in those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right out of heaven, if she'd been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn't a sweeter place in this entire world." (p. 227) Unfortunately, like Hagar who responds, "Well, that's a mighty odd combination prayer and that," Lees too feels that "God is love, but please don't mention the two in the same breath." (p. 228) Their son dies in a housefire while he and his wife are at a church service on the theme of the end of the world. Clearly,

then, according to Laurence, men like Lees and Bram have suffered as much from the other-wordly orientation of Christianity as have women.

Laurence's immediate point, however is that Hagar is "not alone" in her grief, as the Reverend Troy had earlier tried to convince her. Lees' confession leads to Hagar's own therapeutic recollection of the night her son died. In this recollection, Laurence further emphasises the way in which lack of rituals and of such a religious role model as the "Sorrowful Mother" result in Hagar's turning into "stone". Simultaneously, Laurence ironically evokes as classical prototype for her protagonist, namely, Niobe, another "ubstristic" woman who suffered the wrath of Apollo's mother for boasting about her procreative abilities, and who wept for her lost children until her eyes and body became "dry".

Provided with the advantage of confession and, significantly, not conscious of the fact that she has done so, Hagar is able to weep, the purgative aspect of which is also accompanied by her very real fit of vomiting.

The final phase of this revitalized ritual occurs when Hagar, unconsciously acts out her atonement with her son and, with Lees acting as his surrogate, receives his son's forgiveness. As a result, Hagar "could even beg God's pardon this moment, for thinking ill of him some time or other." (p.248) Designed to express her gratitude to God, Hagar's comment also suggests an understanding of what the Divine Parent may have felt in sacrificing his Son.

Yet ultimately it is indeed "God the Mother" who comes to Hagar's aid in her last days, not in any individualized or other-wordly form but rather in the collective experience of love and maternity shared by the dying women who make up "the mewling nursery of old ladies," (p.264) as Hagar at first sarcastically describes them. Significantly a trio – evocative of the Trinity and the triple aspect of the goddess in pagan mythology – each of these women has something in common with Hagar, which, however they manifest in positive and archetypal forms. Most articulate of the three is Eva Jardine, a skinny old crone of a woman who like Hagar stems from garden mother, and who finds her sustenance in her love for her husband. Second is Mrs.Dobereiner whose foreign tongue isolates her from her kind but who finds consolation in singing hymns about the true "home country" she expects to find after death; to these hymns the other women respond even without understanding the words. Finally there is Mrs.Reilly, like Hagar a ton of a woman but whose obesity makes her a type of "Great Mother" and whose prayers are addressed to the Roman Catholic equivalent of that *primordial* figure.

Reluctant at first to join the group, Hagar finally subconsciously acknowledges her sisterhood and her affiliation with these women's mysteries when she joins the nightly litany:

Tom. Don't you worry none—
Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of—
Mein Gott, erlose mich—
You mind that time, Tom? I mind it so well—
I am sorry for having offended Thee, because I love—
Erlöse mich von meinen Schmerzen—
Bram! (p.275)

And having found this kind of religious support system, Hagar can also acknowledge the Judaeo-Christian deity without lapsing into the role of a suppliant daughter: "Ought I to appeal? It's the done thing. Our Father—no. I want no part of that. All I can think is—Bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I'll not beg." (p.307)

Margaret Laurence is thus profoundly concerned with the relationship between women's identity and religious issues. She can be termed an, "evisionist" or

reformist—a feminist who finds many faults with the Judaeo-Christian tradition but still feels it possible to discover or recover a viable female ideology within that religious framework. *The Stone Angel* does not seem to support many feminist contentions but rather points to dimensions which have largely been ignored: namely, the way in which Judaeo-Christian tradition fosters egocentricity and in turn alienation and loneliness on account of its monotheistic character, the extent to which the decline of religious authority reverberates in the secular spheres, and the extent to which this decline can be traced to the aftermath of Renaissance individualism or to the rationalism of the eighteenth century.

The Stone Angel;
A Novel of
Awakening

3.4 LET US SUM UP

The Stone Angel is Laurence's best known and most deeply respected novel. It is unique in being a novel of awakening. Carol Christ finds a common pattern in women's spiritual quest. It begins with an experience of "nothingness" and ends with a new naming of self and reality. Christ gives a long list of ideas common to the novel of awakening. These are the survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present. Hagar Shipley's spiritual quest begins with her experience of nothingness in her relationships with her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons. Hagar Shipley's awakening is dependent upon her ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother. The other aspect of the novel discussed in the unit deals with the contention held by liberationists that a major factor preventing women from achieving a genuine sense of identity is the dominant philosophy embedded in Judaeo-Christian Theology. Evelyn J. Hinz has explored the connection between religious issues and female identity in *The Stone Angel*. She argues that the protagonists' problems arise out of the religious climate in which she has been brought up. Hagar's relationship with her father is not simply a modern version of the Electra Complex because of Judaeo-Christian traditions of emphasis on mental/male talents.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Cravat:	a kind of neck cloth worn by men
Allegiance:	relation or obligation to a sovereign
Individuated:	individualised or given individuality
Ambivalence:	coexistence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object.
Binary:	composed of two, two fold
Permeable:	worthy of penetration
Iconographically:	by way of a portrait
Effeminacy:	womanish softness or weakness, indulgence in unmanly pleasures.
Degeneracy:	the process of departing from the high qualities of race or kind becoming base.
Egocentricity:	self-contredness or regard only for the ego.

Archetypal:	based on the original pattern or prototype
Logos:	in the Stoic philosophy, the active principle living in and determining the world.
Eros:	the Greek love-God.
Hubris:	arrogance that invites disaster
Maenadic:	in the manner of a female follower of Bacchus.
Primordial:	existing from the beginning
Litany:	a prayer in which the same thing is repeated several times.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Hagar is a true example of the mindset of a motherless woman. Do you agree with the statement? Why?
2. The spiritual journey of Hagar is a journey towards acceptance. Discuss.
3. How does Hagar's encounter with Murray Lees help her in getting rid of some of her guilt complexes?
4. The Self-alienation in the case of Hagar is the consequence of her religious background. Substantiate this view from the text of *The Stone Angel*.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 *The Stone Angel*: The Title
- 4.2 *The Stone Angel*: A Referential Object
- 4.3 *The Stone Angel*: Different Meanings.
- 4.4 The Functions of *The Stone Angel*
- 4.5 The Biblical Angel
- 4.6 Moving Away from *The Stone Angel*/The theme of Redemption in the Novel.
- 4.7 Use of Imagery in *The Stone Angel*
- 4.8 Significance of the Past
- 4.9 Significance of Manawaka
- 4.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.11 Glossary
- 4.12 Questions
- 4.13 Bibliography

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In the earlier units some distinguished thematic aspects of *The Stone Angel* have been discussed. This unit takes up for analysis and discussion some technical aspects of the novel. First it deals with the title of the novel. With a view to establishing the appropriateness of the title various issues related to the term “stone angel” are discussed. The theme of redemption and the commendable use of imagery in *The Stone Angel* are also taken up. Laurence felt strongly about the significance of past and place in human affairs and in the moulding of human character. Therefore these two aspects of her fictional art are also being discussed in this unit.

4.1 THE STONE ANGEL : THE TITLE

For Margaret Laurence there is a lot in a name, in a title. “Titles” she says “are important as they should in some way express the theme of the book in a rather poetic way.” (Interview with Michel Fabre, *Etudes Canadiennes*, Vol.77 (1981) p.11-12) The title which she chose for her first Canadian novel certainly fits her definition. Simone Vauthier in her essay “Images in Stones, Images in Words” comments: “Solid and ethereal, opaque and spiritual, *The Stone Angel* confronts the reader with a challenge that is felt all the more because of the oxymoron quality of the phrase.” The critic further argues, “Announcing the new – the text to come—also resonates with the old: Thomas Wolfe’s lyrical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*. Hardly have we had time to puzzle about it, however when the narration blocks our flight of imagination by presenting us with a fictional referent for the title. “Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand....”(p.3)

As the opening paragraph describes the monument and the cemetery where blind and superlative it used to rise, the reader is taken on a tour of Manawaka’s burial ground – and of the novel’s major semantic polarities. We are in a sense reassured; so that is what the title refers to – this marble statue “brought from Italy at great expense,” (p.3) erected in memory of the narrator- protagonists’ mother. Nevertheless, the prominence of the statue both in the cemetery and in the narrator’s memory and narration, the expansion of its oxymoronic features, as in “she viewed the town with sightless eyes” (p.3) - all this points to its being, more than an element of the décor, a nexus of meaning which we are called upon to (re)construct.

4.2 THE STONE ANGEL : A REFERENTIAL OBJECT

The stone angel is one of the most important fictional objects in the novel. Three major characters—the protagonist Hagar, her father Jason Currie, her son John Shipley—are involved with the statue which thereby becomes an actant with a narrative function. What they do to it or about it, how they respond to it, what is means to them is of concern for readers as well as critics.

In the narrative chain of the novel the stone angel's appearance recurs throughout. It figures more or less prominently in several episodes and forms what we call a motif. On its first appearance, the statue is the focal point of a lengthy and highly charged description of the Manawaka cemetery which as an introduction to the lost world of the narrators' childhood, casts the long shadow of death over the ensuing narrative. The second occurrence is also descriptive: the narrator remembers that, leaving Manawaka and her husband Bram for good, she had had a last glimpse of the cemetery and the statue. In two other appearances, the stone angel is shown as the object of a series of actions and non-actions. On a drive to the cemetery with John, Hagar discovers that the statue lies "toppled over on her face" (p. 178) and that it has been painted with lipstick. Towards the end on a parallel visit with her son Marvin, the elderly Hagar observes certain changes in the angel. "The earth had heaved with frost around her, and she stood askew and tilted. Her mouth was white." (p. 305) The memory leads the narrator to speculate on the future, in a matter-of-fact-way which acquires poignancy from the context: "Someday she'll topple entirely and no one will bother to set her upright again." (p. 305)

These occurrences bring to light a number of things. First, the stone angel has a story: the product of "gouging", "gauging", cynical descendants of Bernini, it has both an aesthetic ancestry in the baroque tradition and a mercantile one in the commercialisation of religious art intended to fulfil "the needs of fledgling Pharaohs". Brought into an uncouth land, the harsh environment of the prairie, it experiences decline. Like humans in flesh and blood, the stone angel, too is subject to vicissitudes of time, since winters and the earth have power over this representative of celestial creatures. Thus the angel motif emphasises the parallelism of her fate with that of human beings. From the very beginning the narrator, without telling us all that she knows addresses the statue as an animate being: "She viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind." (p. 3)

Moreover, the statue's story is also the story of some characters' involvement with her. First there is Jason Currie, the Manawaka store-owner, who bought her "in pride to mark (his wife's) bones." (p. 3) He often tells his daughter that "she had been brought from Italy at a terrible expense and was pure white marble." (p. 3) Currie's claims about the statue connote more of the man and his values and of the culture in which he lives than they do about the artefact. In contrast with the protagonists' father who had the statue erected, her son, it is intimated, is an iconoclast who defaces her with lipstick and overthrows her, an irreverent prank which bespeaks his need for rebellion—and then has to strive powerfully to restore her, on his mothers' orders. Hagar cannot bear the idea of such profanation and cannot leave the statue or her son alone at this point in her life. In all three cases, the character's willingness to take action, whether to pay or play with, or restore the angel, testifies to the importance of the monument as a sign in the narrated world.

4.3 THE STONE ANGEL : DIFFERENT MEANINGS

Each of the characters, of course, invests the statue with different meanings. For Jason Currie, the statue is associated with the dead wife to the memory of whom it has ostensibly been erected. But if it marks her bones, it is also intended to "proclaim his

dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day." (p.3) As it displays his respect for the departed angel of his hearth, it also declares his own wealth, in a way acceptable to a 'Puritan' society, and his rank as one of Manawaka's foremost citizens. "She was the first, the largest and certainly the costliest." (p.3) Although it is supposed to be "harking us all to heaven," (p.3) what the grave marker encodes, in fact, is the "place of the living in the world of the living" a symbol of the ultimate otherness. It is also a rich socio-cultural sign.

Hagar, on the other hand, feels much more ambiguously towards the monument. At one point, the narrator affirms "I never could bear that statue" but events do not fully bear out that assertion. To her, the associations of the stone angel are necessarily double. It is linked with the mother who so easily "relinquished her feeble ghost," (p.3) whose weakness Hagar openly despises. The stone angel emblematises the meekness of "that woman" whom she has never seen, the "frailty" which has been passed to her son Dan who dies young, and which the child Hagar cannot "help but detest". That is to say that the stone emblem of the mother is a reminder both of values which the narrator rejects and of the mortality against which, at the age of ninety, the narrator still keeps raging. Thus the stone angel, mother, death are inextricably and circularly related.

But "her mother's angel" (the phrase is hers) is also her father's monument, a symbol of his attitude towards his family, the community and life. To the extent that it is a reminder of his power and conventionality as well as of the struggles which she had to go through in order to assert herself, the statue is the repository of negative feelings and meanings. To the extent that it embodies paternal and societal values which she still shares, and to the extent that it is a symbol of Currie superiority, difference and triumph over oblivion, the monument cannot but have a positive dimension in Hagar's mind. When she discovers that it has toppled over, she is not only dismayed, she must set it up again. She scrubs off the vulgar pink of the lipstick herself and rationalises her behaviour to her son, explaining that she does not want the Manawaka people to know that such a "wanton thing" could be done to the Currie monument. She is apprehensive further suspecting that since the Simmons plot is just across the way", her childhood rival Lottie would tell everyone. She appears to be motivated only by her recurring worry about what people will think. And even at this level, her concern with appearances reveals how much she shares her father's attitude and small-town mentality and how she extends to the stone angel the function of representing the family and the family's respectability. Hence, for the reader, the image which she wants to project of herself is bound up with the statue.

What is to her a desecration is to John an amusing prank. "Beside me, John laughed. The old lady's taken quite a header." (p.178) He repeatedly suggests that they should leave her lying on her side and painted, which he considers an improvement: "She looks a damn sight better, if you ask me." (p.179) Obviously, he has no reverence for the monument and the Currie greatness it represents. His disregard of respectability, on this occasion as on many others, proves him a Shipley rather than a Currie, despite Hagar's insistence to the contrary. Indeed, when he ironically agrees with his mother that to have Lottie spread the news about the angel "would be an everlasting shame, all right," (p.180) the antiphrase echoes one which Bram Shipley had made in another context. Simon Vauthier argues that there is perhaps more to John's attitude than unconcern about public opinion and general irreverence. In the cemetery scene, a verbal clue sets up a connection between the stone angel and Hagar, when John personifies the statue as "the old lady." The connection in itself would perhaps go unnoticed if it did not recall, and contrast with, an earlier designation when John called his mother "angel". Mother as angel, angel as old lady, the two namings work together to establish a strong link between the living woman and the statue. In this view, the prank on the one becomes a displaced aggression on the other. Moreover, John's attempts to persuade his prim and proper mother to leave the statue alone can be regarded as hints that Hagar should cast off the burden of respectability. His warning that putting back the stone angel is not really worth the risk, acquires metaphorical overtones: "Don't be surprised if she collapses and I break a bone. That

would be great, to break your back because a bloody marble angel fell on you.” (p. 178) While John may be aware of the statue as a weight not only of marble but of propriety, one can fully appreciate the symbolic *adumbration* of the character's fate: John is crushed by the burden of his mother's self-centred expectations and fear of life. In this context, the epithet “bloody” does not function simply as an expletive connoting rejection of polite language and social conventions, or the young man's plebeian heritage; it also functions poetically as a qualifier of “marble angel” to form an oxymoron, which points to and enhances the contradiction of the stone angel and of the woman of which it is a symbol.

4.4 THE FUNCTIONS OF *THE STONE ANGEL*

To start with, the stone angel is the first actant mentioned. “Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one...” (p.3) Its apparition in the text is almost concomitant with the emergence of the narrative voice. More importantly it coincides with the beginning of what proves to be an autobiographical relation, just as in the represented universe it is linked with the actor's birth. From its first description, it is clear that the role of the angel is going to be very important, if not in the action, at least in the construction of the novel's meanings. Because it so conspicuously marks a grave and seemingly operates a disjunction between the living and the dead, the sightless statue may blind us momentarily with the dark dazzle of death. At first one may be aware mostly of its negativity: its lack of sight or knowledge, in particular, is repeatedly indicated, often with words or syntagms which are themselves negative forms (“sightless”, “doubly blind”, “unendowed with even a pretense of sight”, “blank”, “without knowing who we were at all”). However, such negative features are counterbalanced by verbs which denote a contrary activity, “she viewed”, “harking us all to heaven”. We soon apprehend that it must play a structuring role in the expansion of the narrative.

From the very beginning, the stone angel appears as a figure both of disjunction and of conjunction. As an actant in the narrative, it emphasises the separation between the living and the dead, this world and the other, the pride of the survivors and the power of death, the “dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead” and the disorder of nature, on the one hand, and the messiness of life (symbolised here by the disreputable old Mrs Weese and her sick-smelling sheets which foreshadow later conditions in Hagar's life), on the other hand. At the same time, in the textual weave, these dichotomies are overcome by a series of semiotic linkages. Eventually, the statue must be seen as partaking of both the natural and the supernatural.

If, on one level of analysis, one may claim, as Sandra Djwa does, that it is a form without spirit, a monument to purity and propriety, on a semiotic level, it remains associated with things spiritual: the marble form functions as a sign, almost a signal: “harking us all to heaven”, it has a message, socially coded, to be sure, yet distinct from the more secular “purpose” it assumes for its buyer. An image of a supernatural being, it also attests to man's cultural efforts to manage death and control nature, thereby bringing together several dimensions of human experience.

Throughout, the blank statue in the Manawaka cemetery is projected against a background of angelic information – concerning the angels of the dictionary, “ministering angels”, “angels of mercy” and the like, the angels of the encyclopedia scriptural and theological – angels as lesser breeds of powers and dominations, messengers of God and the divine –, but also literary – the angels of Milton and others. Singularly, the opening description calls to mind the line from *Lycidas*, “Look homeward, angel, and melt with ruth” which Thomas Wolfe used as the title of his first published autobiographical novel. From her hilltop, our angel looks homeward towards the town and what turns out to be the bleak lives of its inhabitants. Though it

certainly does not melt with ruth, the possibility has been sown in the minds of the readers aware either of the Miltonic line or simply of the compassionate qualities ascribed to angels. That is to say, because of the vast intertext in which angels play a part, Margaret Laurence's angel reverberates from the start with imaginary resonances that go far beyond the immediate context.

Another important function the stone angel performs is to magnetise recurring notations and images into semantic and thematic patterns that heighten the unity of the novel, and the angel motif with its inner tensions, in fact, energises the plot. There is a strong growing identification which the text builds up between Hagar and the stone angel. That the stubbornly erect Hagar will somehow be brought low in the narrative is programmed in the angel matrix. A foreshadowing of the ultimate fall into oblivion is even presented through yet a different version of the angel motif. After evoking her nights with Bram and how she "prided [herself] upon keeping [her] pride intact, like some maidenhead" (p. 81) (an example incidentally, which illustrates the self-generating circularity of pride), Hagar comments on her present loneliness:

My bed is as cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow, and they would spread their arms and sweep them down to their sides, and when they rose, there would be the outline of an angel with spread wings. The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard and freeze. (p. 81)

The juxtaposition of past and present nights too establishes some relation of cause and effect between the past pride and the present dereliction of the character. Her loneliness is bodied forth in a series of analogies and metaphors which compellingly fuse the horizontal position, the angel figure, sleep, winter and snow into a muted but clear adumbration of death. Here again, angel and death are joined, yet the angel stretched on the ground is a child-made silhouette. Although it is contextualised back into the familiar cluster of death symbolism, this angel appears also as a shadow figure, a sort of double. And thus, beyond the bit of Canadian folklore, we are referred to our angelic intertext —to the idea of the angel as guardian spirit, as the double that stands for the higher part of our nature. This other conception of angels also fleetingly recurs in a humorous remark which Hagar makes about the minister who pays her a visit: "He stares upward at the air, as though birdwatching. Perhaps he hopes for a discarded angel feather to drift down and spur him on." (p. 119) Even if we take into account that Hagar is making fun of the clumsy young minister, the reference is, if I may say so to the real thing, the heavenly creature which contrasts with the cemetery angels of rigid wings. Furthermore, although synecdochically represented by a feather, the angel is supposed to play his role of spiritual inspiration.

If Hagar's 'fall' is programmed in the controlling image, it also proves a happy fall, for when, stripped of her mask of strength, she confronts her destructiveness and her fear of death, she can experience some sort of belated spiritual regeneration which Margaret Laurence presents very convincingly through Hagar's retreat and decent to Shadow Point, the meeting with another 'liminal', and the confrontation of past ghosts, the apologies she deliriously makes to John, and so on. The outcome of this process is – the (unconscious) realization of angelism and the breaking of the petrification process.

4.5 THE BIBLICAL ANGEL

Finally, in the episode that shows best the regeneration of Hagar, the angel motif in its positive aspect is foregrounded again. Now the reference is to the last meeting between Hagar and the son whom she had not wanted, whom she considered was none of her but who has cared for her in her old age. For once, Hagar, not knowing

what possesses her, tells Marvin that she is frightened. The unusual admission incites Marvin to apologise for having been crabby with her. And the scene develops in this way:

I stare at him. Then, quite unexpectedly, he reaches for my hand and holds it tightly.

Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength, and bargaining. I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

It's in my mind to ask for his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me.

'You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John.' (p.304)

To Hagar, this is "a lie, yet not a lie" but her belief that it is a lie measures all the better how far she has come from angelism, from the girl who did not want to impersonate her mother. She has been humanised, and now understands the needs of Marvin, to the extent that she gives up the idea of asking him for his pardon and instead tells him what she knows he needs from her. The dying woman seems unaware that her sense of what Marvin is attempting echoes her earlier image of John, as he struggled with the statue in the Manawaka cemetery.

I wish he [John] could have looked like Jacob then, wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no. He sweated and grunted angrily. His feet slipped and he hit his forehead on a marble ear, and swore. (p. 179)

In both cases, Hagar, whose imagination has been fed on the Book casts her sons in the same biblical role of Jacob, who incidentally was his mother's favourite. But in the first, the analogy, which reveals that like her father and husband she is not without dynastic hopes, works by contrast to suggest her disappointment. John is no Jacob but a man engaged in an awkward task, who grunts and slips, sweats and swears. Hagar's angelism is frustrated by the incident. Ready as she was to impose biblical symbolism on the scene, she is not prepared to invest it with another meaning. This remains for the reader to seek. In the context, the stone angel appears metonymically and metaphorically linked to Hagar, to the burden of the demands which, angel that she is, she makes on her family and on John in particular. On the other hand, though John, as we have seen, seems to identify symbolically the stone angel with his mother, he is not trying to wrest a blessing from her. Only the overthrow of the angel would be liberating, but, because he is more Shipley than Currie, he complies with the wishes of the phallic mother and restores the phallic statue. Introduced only to be denied, the biblical analogy, however, cannot be fully neutralised. And the absence of the Angel of God who wrestled with Jacob until he could bless him creates a vacuum which the text later partially fills with the return to the Old Testament motif, in the scene with Marvin.

While the first occurrence of the motif displays Hagar's disappointed expectations and reveals her self-deception, the second signals a moment of understanding, consequent upon the recognition of the destructiveness of her pride. This time, Hagar perceives Marvin, her neglected, belittled son, as Jacob – as the heir of her dynasty and of God's promise. The realisation, however, is slightly ambiguous. "Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob," (p.304) she says. What with "now" which may be opposed to then, and with "is truly" opposed to "I wish he could have looked like Jacob," (p.179) it seems as if Hagar were confusing Marvin with John, mixing up her responses to her two sons into one recognition. This time the son is "gripping with all his strength, and bargaining;" not grunting, not yielding, he is wrestling with the messenger of God. This time, too, Hagar's use of the biblical metaphor implicates

her: "I see I am thus strangely cast." (p.304) She again is the angel. But no longer unwittingly, no longer adhering to a false ideal – playing instead a role she had never understood. No longer the stone angel, but the angel of God, and therefore able to release and be released. No longer a destructive victim of angelism but the embodiment of a force that is not hers alone, that has blocked Marvin's past life but can bless/liberate him into his full identity as his mother's son. (Through the encounter with the Angel, the biblical Jacob knows himself as Israel). The angel here is not "antipathetic to life" – Douglas Killam's phrase to define the stone angel. On the contrary, it is life-enhancing. Strikingly, Hagar's recognition of her bond to her son and of her spiritual power comes to her when she has relinquished "angelism".

4.6 MOVING AWAY FROM *THE STONE ANGELS*/THE THEME OF REDEMPTION IN THE NOVEL

In her interview with Michel Fabre and elsewhere, Margaret Laurence has spoken of the sense of redemption in the novel. For Laurence survival does not mean physical survival alone. For her it is the survival of the spirit. She tells Michel Fabre:

"I mean survival of the spirit with some ability to give and receive love. In what happens to Hagar at the very end of the novel there is to me some sense of redemption. Close to the end of her life she for the first time, really can admit to herself, when she says "Pride is my wilderness",.... that she has been unable to give and receive the kind of love she was capable of."

The Stone Angel certainly builds up a thematics of salvation. True, there is no supernatural intercession, not even a fully realised conversion on the character's part. Presbyterian born and bred as she is, Hagar often refers to God but she cannot believe in his mercy. Her conversations with the minister, or her refusal at the end to appeal to God proves this:

Ought I to appeal? It's the done thing. Our Father – no, I want no part of that. All I can think is – Bless me or not, Lord, just as You please, for I'll not beg. (p.307)

Towards the end, she seems to believe in the possibility of an after-life. The prayer quoted above follows immediately upon a meditation on breathing – a condition of human life – and whether there might still be breathing "elsewhere", in an after-life. "If it happened that way, I'd pass out in amazement. Can angels faint?" (p.307) This playful speculation hints that Hagar would like to believe in the existence of angels in heaven, of celestial hosts she might join. At any rate, the speculation keeps alive the angel paradigm in the narrative.

Whatever the character's notions, the novel supports the idea that redemption is possible. In this respect, Hagar is the first adumbration of the protagonist in Margaret Laurence's last novel. Of Morag, Margaret Laurence has said that "she comes closer to what might be termed the God within," and the novelist further generalises: "I don't have a traditional religion but I believe that there's a mystery at the core of life." (Interview with Michel Fabre. p.16) This is an important clue to her fiction and to *The Stone Angel* in particular. Hagar's regeneration is a coming closer to the God within, a result and a token of the mystery at the core of life. This sense of mystery the writer weaves into the fabric of the narrative largely through the angel imagery. The angel, among other things, is the symbol of that part of our nature which transcends nature but cannot be separated from it, however the practitioners of "angelism" may strive to dissociate the two. As the symbol of the spiritual, the mysterious, the angel is very remote from the conventional figure of purity. Thus we find Murry Lees, the shabby little man who does represent a form of humility and love in the novel, juxtaposing angels and sexuality in his praise of his wife:

In those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right down from heaven if she'd been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn't a sweeter place in this entire world. (p.227)

Murray Lees sees no disparity between the two talents of his wife, one linking her with angels, the other with one of the sons of men, even though a narrow-minded puritan religion has made her ashamed of her second talent.

With this widening of the angel paradigm, we have left the referential stone angel far behind. As Margaret Laurence said to Michel Fabre, the stone angel in the cemetery is something she needed for her introduction. We might add that she needed it for her whole novel. In the same interview, the writer affirms that the stone angel in the novel is not the biblical angel of the myth and while asserting that it "does dominate the book like an imposing symbol" she limits its role to the symbolising of the blindness of pride – an aspect of it which many critics have emphasised.

While it is difficult to claim that the angel in the novel functions as the biblical angel (but which angel is Margaret Laurence referring to, one wonders?), there are direct echoes, of the Bible, and the motif as it invests the text becomes itself invested with more and more meaning. An oxymoronic signifier, 'the stone angel' straddles the animate and the non-animate, the earthly and the heavenly, death and life, and so on. Exploring and exploiting some of these contradictions, the novel gathers them all into a coincidentia oppositorum in which the socially coded statue of the Manawaka world turns into an emblem of the human predicament. Eventually, the stone angel stands for death-in-life and life-in-death. In the last analysis, it may also serve as a self-reflexive symbol of the work itself, a verbal monument which representing life cannot but inscribe death, and inscribing death ultimately asserts life. In this view, the work itself appears as a monument to the writer's past, factual or phantasmatic- a monument which the reader must deface, upset and restore before it can yield a spiritual depth.

4.7 USE OF IMAGERY IN *THE STONE ANGEL*

Images, metaphors and symbols, the privileged tools of literary creation hold true for most fiction, but they are particularly relevant in the case of Laurence's works. A web of intricate images is the technical excellence of *The Stone Angel*. The universality of the theme, and the intricacy of the images, make *The Stone Angel* a novel that readily lends itself to textual analysis along new critical lines. Students are sometimes surprised by questions on Hagar's prairie environment, as if it were irrelevant. But Hagar is a Scots- Presbyterian from the Canadian West, and her perceptions grow from these roots. The starkly beautiful Manitoba land becomes the analogue for her conflicts. The Manawaka cemetery for example holds formal peonies and upstart ants; wildflowers encroach on its tenuous order. The theme of pride as an isolating wilderness is caught in the class structured guest list of Manawakan parties. Japanese porch lanterns hung from wooden gingerbread trim, are ironic reminders of the exclusion of Orientals from full participation in Canadian society, an exclusion which is the indirect source of Hagar's West Coast job as housekeeper.

By juxtaposition Laurence establishes subtle parallels between the town's social hegemony (shanties and brick houses), its harsh climate contrasts in prairie environment suggest paradoxes in human nature. These include muddy farmyards awash in urine, skeletal machinery and lilacs, "a seasonal mercy." Chokecherries sting sweetly. The "heedless and compelled" sap of Manitoba maples suggest

Hagar's sexual attraction to Bram, but the pride which makes her conceal her enjoyment of their sexual relation, acts once again, to isolate her.

Major Aspects of the Novel

Prairie weather provides analogues for pride, passion, fear, and for Puritan culture whose flaws and strengths provoke ambivalent feelings in Laurence. Bram's beloved horse Soldier freezes to death in a storm; ironically, his fatal freedom stemmed from Bram's fear of fire. As a girl in town, Hagar feels secure during storms, but on the farm storms mean dangerous isolation. Fire and snow, the refrain in Piquette's Song in *The Diviners*, is the culmination of many scenes in the Manawaka books that anchor these images of human pain and passion in prairie weather and culture.

The sight, feel, smell of the land and the culture run through every paragraph. Hagar's arthritic muscles and veins are like pieces of binder twine in her legs. Twenty-four years of bickering with Bram is a prairie river "scoured away like sandbanks." (p. 116) The things Hagar sees as she leaves Manawaka, image the death of her relation with Bram: the cemetery; the railway buildings and water tower painted blood-red, black trees, and farms lost and smothered in winter landscape. The pain of this departure and her latent guilt, are suggested through a prairie thunder storm where lightning rends the sky "like an angry claw at the cloak of God." (p. 161)

The terrible depression of the 1930s, and the drought that compounded its effect in the Canadian West, coincides with Bram's death. Neglected farmhouses and rusty machinery resemble aging bodies; boarded windows are bandaged eyes; warped building "wore a caved-in look like toothless jaws," (p. 169) sunflowers hang empty as unfilled honeycombs; air and land are bone-dry, deathly. Hard work and laziness now yield the same result: nothing. This blunt fact of prairie life in the thirties takes on symbolic meaning in Hagar's decision to let Bram and her father share one tombstone: "They are only different sides of the same coin, anyway, he and the Curries." (p. 184) Biblical analogues spring to mind, such as the parable of the worker who begins his labors late in the day, or St. Paul's reminder that salvation is not bought with works.

One form of pride, or bondage involves Canada's native people. Indian and Metis compose Manawaka's social rejects. *The Stone Angel* touches lightly on a theme that looms larger as the Manawaka cycle progresses. Its opening scene evokes the native people through the wild, musky things on the edge of the town's orderly cemetery. Such plants had flourished when Cree "with enigmatic faces and greasy hair" (p. 5) were the sole inhabitants of the prairie bluffs.

Examples of racial prejudice are unobtrusive, but form a pattern. Matt would have liked to shoot and set trap lines with Jules Tonnerre at Galloping Mountain, but Jason Currie forbids his teenage son to associate with half-breeds. Bram is initially condemned for having been seen with half-breed girls, and continues to joke and drink with Metis after his marriage to Hagar. She is attracted by his dark good looks "I thought he looked a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face," (p. 45) but soon comes to share in local prejudices. Hagar despises herself for being forced to serve the threshers, "a bunch of breeds and ne'er-do-wells and Galicians." (p. 114) She refuses to believe John when he describes the Tonnerre shak as passably clean. Her humiliation in Currie's General Store when Bram is suspected of buying lemon extract for resale to Indians triggers her decision to leave. When John tells Hagar, later, of the death of Bram's old metis crony, Hagar replies (albeit with a bad conscience) "Good riddance to bad rubbish." (p. 176)

John's rebellious nature is expressed in part through his friendship with the Tonnerres. As a child, John trades the family crest-pin to Lazarus Tonnerres for a knife, one which Morag inherits in *The Diviners*. As adolescents, John and the Metis boys dare one another to hair-raising escapades. John's death on the railway trestle bridge is the result of a drunken response to a drunken Metis dare. Indirectly, Hagar is partly responsible, having driven John to desperation and drink by plotting to separate him from Arlene. Symbolically, the tragedy suggests that the destinies of

whites and Metis in Canada are conjoined, a theme to be developed at much greater length in *The Diviners*.

Hagar's rebelliousness is expressed in the novel's epigraph "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light" and the title image. The latter metaphor, like Dylan Thomas's injunction to "rage" against death, catches much of the paradoxical quality of human existence. Hagar's rage, which involves the pride that prevents her from rejoicing, is also her stubborn love of life, her courage, her fighting spirit—qualities lacking in her brothers. The tragic aspect of her experience, her alienation, is thus inseparably united with her admirable fighting spirit. Like the wounded gull in the cannery, Hagar's strength is both her glory and her doom. There is no place for quietism in Laurence's creed.

From a thematic point of view, the five Canadian books (four novels and a collection of short stories) belong to the classic genre of the novel of initiation and self-discovery, implying the protagonists progress from inexperience and innocence to a form of knowledge, which is gradually achieved through a series of trials, affected by inner and external circumstances and chance encounters with other characters, the quest culminating in a revelation or epiphany – the climax of the inner change. In such a perspective, sight as a traditional symbol of intellectual and spiritual awareness stands most naturally as the key element of the pursuit. Chantal Arleltaz argues that "each of Laurence's work set in Canada describes the search for a kind of truth or inner depth, something beyond the immediately visible, through an initiatory travel from blindness to self-awareness. Her five women protagonists are all to some extent victims of outward appearances including their own selves; each of them exemplifies one particular weakness or shortcoming conveyed through visual imagery." The blind stone angel in the *The Stone Angel*, in terms of visual symbolism represents the blindness of Hagar, the protagonists who could not look beyond appearances.

Structurally speaking, the image of the stone angel unifies the novel. The actual angel marks the grave of Hagar's mother who died in giving birth to her stubborn daughter. Purchased to proclaim the Curie dynasty, the angel is doubly blind, carved without eyeballs by cynical stonemasons (Hagar thinks) who accurately gauged "the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land." (p.3) Like Jason's church contribution the statue is pride made visible, blind to the needs of others and to the deepest needs of self. As the proud product of an Eastern finishing school, Hagar is "Pharaoh's daughter reluctantly returning to his roof." (p.43) As she leaves the town and her husband, Hagar sees the stone angel in the cemetery, sightlessly guarding emptiness and death. Bram's senility fills her with anger at fate, or God, "for giving us eyes but almost never sight." (p.173) John, who has his own blindness, wrestles with the angel in the cemetery while Hagar looks on. Later, it stands crookedly over two men's graves. The irascible Hagar, prisoner by flesh and pride, waits "stonily" for poor Mr. Troy. In this paradoxical image the stone half (bondage) is more prominent than the linked suggestions of light, love, freedom, and life.

The novel's structure depends as much upon a web of interlocking images as upon its handling of time through flashbacks. Prominent among these patterns are those of houses and birds, archetypal metaphors for human experience which are as old as language itself. Northrop Frye points to two contrasting worlds of metaphoric organization, one desirable and the other undesirable. He calls these the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively, terms that are useful in analyzing Laurence's image patterns.

The demonic world of bondage, pain and confusion is suggested in *The Stone Angel* by the wilderness/Pharaoh pattern and by maimed and captive birds. The sight of Silverthreads a home for the elderly which Hagar envisages as a prison, sets her heart pulsing against its cage of bones "like a berserk bird." (p.95) The gull trapped like Hagar in the old cannery, is wounded by her as it screams their common fear. Horrified Hagar recalls its free soaring. The gull's broken wing reduces it to the level to which age has reduced Hagar, its strength becomes a hazard. Two dogs sound like

merciless wolfish fiends. Hagar's curiosity and fear are answered by the arrival of Murray Lees. The wounded bird that drew the hounds off Murray's trail now appears as scapegoat and sacrificial victim: the demonic parody of Eucharist symbolism in the apocalyptic world.

Chickens serve as a frequent form of demonic bird imagery. The Manawaka dump, which figures much more prominently in *The Diviners*, is the stage here for a grotesque and sickening scene in Hagar's childhood. A load of spoiled eggs has hatched in the summer sun. The feeble, foodless chicks are prisoner by their shells and by each other. Hagar, for reasons she does not understand as a child refuses to help Lottie kill the chicks; at ninety, still puzzled she thinks it was right to refrain, although her reasons are obscure to her.

Worth remembering is the incident when Hagar, en route to Silverthreads thinks of calves struggling to be born. She has always had a fellow feeling for anything struggling into life. We remember it with new force as Hagar and Lottie Simmons sit plotting the separation of their adult children, pretending it is for John and Arlene's good. The two old women attempt to haggle with fate. They agree that Arlene should be sent East until she and John can afford to marry. Hagar and Lottie see the stifling of John and Arlene's relationship as a mercy-killing. At this point, Hagar remembers the bloody chicks, but Lottie has completely repressed the incident.

A concordance would reveal the remarkable frequency of bird patterns. Hagar in hospital, in a restraint, is like a trussed fowl. In the cannery memories swoop like gulls, and the prospect of confronting herself is imaged as a fearsome storm which might sweep bird out to sea and drawn into its depths "as still and cold as black glass." (p.235) Discovered by Marvin, Hagar is "an old hawk caught." (p.251) Hospitalized, her pain beats its wings against her rib cage, while nearby voices like birds caught inside a building are heard.

Birds with their power of flight, are traditional emblems of freedom and the human spirit. Laurence uses this archetype in her pun which recurs in the Manawaka fiction. The demonic form of the image, the captive bird which in prairie folklore portends death, also recurs. The title story of a *A Bird in the House* concerns the death of Vanessa's father and the young girl's loss of religious faith. But the larger narrative of Vanessa's maturation restores to the bird image its apocalyptic suggestions of spirit and freedom. The latter suggest the partial and hard-won freedom of the young adult. It includes an understanding and acceptance of her people and her culture, an inheritance which proclaims itself in her veins.

Houses and furnishing form another prominent image pattern. They serve as analogues for human bodies and by extension, human lives. Lamps and chairs are memories made visible. Laurence's image patterns reflect her wit. Hagar's first experience of sex provides a comical house metaphor: the bride had not known she has "a room to house such magnitude." (p.52) The hen house surrounded by chicken wire sags bunchily "like bloomers without elastic." (p.114) The abandoned house at Shadow Point another container for Hagar and her memories has no lock; this mock castle like her aging body affords neither privacy nor defense.

In the final analysis one can say that in the field of literary creative vision, Laurence has played the part of an interpreter, providing the reader's imagination with a certain vision of the world achieved through the use of language, the choice of themes, characters, narrative patterns, and imagery.

4.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAST

Graham Greene is of the opinion that a writer's "whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share." (As quoted by Margaret Laurence in *A Place to Stand On*, Edmonton Ne West Press, 1983, p.15)

Margaret Laurence admits that Graham Green is right in this statement. She believes that for the writer one way of discovering oneself is through the exploration inherent in the writing itself. According to her a great many writers, at all points attempt to understand their background and their past sometimes even a more distant past which they have not personally experienced. This sort of exploration is very clearly seen in the works of contemporary African writers who recreate their peoples' past in novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value. They have found it necessary in other words to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being stifled or threatened by that past.

Margaret Laurence realised that much and her own writing had followed the same pattern – “the attempt to assimilate the past, partly in order to be freed from it, partly in order to try to understand myself and perhaps others of my generation, through seeing where we had come from.” (*A Place to Stand On* p.15) In *The Stone Angel* Margaret Laurence has approached her own background, her own past through her grandparent's generation the generation of pioneers of Scots-Presbyterian origin, who had been among the first to people the town she calls Manawaka. This was where her own roots began. Other past generations of her father's generation had lived in Scotland, but for her, her people's real past – her own real past – was not connected except distantly with Scotland, indeed this was true for Hagar as well for she was born in Manawaka.

From the point of view of characterization also, the past plays a significant role. Like humans in real life, great fictional personalities are not static; they evolve, accumulate and alter with age. The notions of inheritance and survival, which Laurence says are essential to all her novels, implicate a character in time, binding her to past and future. David J. Jeffery argues that “Laurence's fascination with time is peculiarly Canadian because it reflects our belief in the existence, utility, and necessity of historical meaning. People cannot understand themselves or their plight in isolation; they need the context of larger cultural forces.” When Laurence's characters speak in the voice of memory, they register the passing of time in their style, and by speaking, they seek to ease the burden of the past.

The Past is a lingering presence in the narrator's mind. He or she must disentangle a network of temporal pressures from personal and ancestral pasts, from family inheritance, from historical and legendary traditions. Time itself becomes integral to Laurence's themes and techniques. Because the stories are told in retrospect, the very act of recalling enters into the drama, making memory an important structural principle, a means of both recognition and deception, and a power for integrating past and present in a meaningful whole. Memory becomes a creative power that artfully surveys the past.

In *The Stone Angel* it is weaving of the past and the present strands that makes the final fabric of the work. Through an alternating pattern we are given the story of Hagar's life and the account of her last struggle to maintain her independence. When the weaving is done we see her as a character portrayed with deep understanding and sympathy. Alone, by the edge of the sea, she takes refuge from storm and cold in a crumbling cannery. Hagar reviews the darkest moment of her life—the deaths of her drunken husband and her favourite son John. Then into the blackness of her night comes a fool – a vague parallel to Lear's fool – a tipling insurance salesman, Murray F. Lees. Together they fill their bellies with cheap red wine, then tell each other, sad tales of loss and of sorrow. And to Hagar as she listens to Lees and as she receives from him understanding and kindness, comes understanding of self and the realisation that tragedy is the common lot of man.

By reviewing her past, Hagar, the old stone angel receives eyes and sees with terrifying clarity that she herself has been the cause of her blackened years. “Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out

from me and shackled all I touched.” (p.292) Such profound understanding of oneself is the reward of looking back in Margaret Laurence’s fiction.

4.9 THE SIGNIFANCE OF MANAWAKA

Margaret Laurence admits that “much of my writing relates to the kind of prairie town in which I was born and in which I first began to be aware of myself, writing, for me has to be set firmly in some soil, some place, some outer and inner territory which might be described in anthropological terms as “cultural background”. She further says, “The name Manawaka is an invented one, but it had been in my mind since I was about seventeen or eighteen, when I first began to think about writing something set in a prairie town. Manawaka is not my home town of Neepawa although it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the Hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, as Graham Greene says, which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share.” (*A Place to Stand On*. p.16-17)

While talking about the influence of a place on one’s writing Margaret Laurence argues that a place influences the writing in two ways. “First, the physical presence of the place itself – its geography, its appearance. Second, the people. For me, the second aspect of environment is the most important, although in everything I have written which is not set in Canada, whether or not actually set in Manitoba, somewhere some of my memories of the physical appearance of the prairies come in. I had, as a child and as an adolescent, ambiguous feelings about the prairies. I still have them, although they no longer bothered me. I wanted to go out of the small town and go far away, and yet I felt the protectiveness of that atmosphere, too. I felt the loneliness and the isolation of the land itself and yet I always considered southern Manitoba to be very beautiful, and I still do. I doubt if I will ever live there again, but those poplar bluffs and the blackness of that soil and the way in which the sky is open from one side of the horizon to the other, these are things I will carry inside my skull for as long as I live, with the vividness of recall that only our first home can have for us.” (*A Place to Stand On*. p.16)

“Nevertheless, the people were more important than the place. Hagar in *The Stone Angel* was not drawn from life, but she incorporates many of the qualities of my grandparent’s generation. Her speech is their speech, and her gods their gods. I think I never recognized until I wrote that novel just how mixed my own feelings were towards that whole generation of pioneers- how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of them, and how willing to show anger. And yet, they had inhabited a wildness and made it fruitful. They were in the end great survivors and for that I love and value them.” (*A Place to Stand On*. p.17)

About the possibility of an inhibiting or negative fallout of cultural background, Laurence comments, “But I do not believe that this kind of writing needs to be parochial. If Hagar in *The Stone Angel* has any meaning, it is the same as that of an old woman anywhere, having to deal with the reality of dying. On the other hand, she is not an old woman anywhere. She is very much a person who belongs in the same kind of prairie Scot – Presbyterian background as I do, and it was of course, people like Hagar who created that background with all its flaws and strengths.” (*A Place to Stand On*. p.17)

4.10 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Laurence believed that titles express the theme of the book in a poetic way. The title of *The Stone Angel* points to a nexus of meaning which the reader is called upon to reconstruct. The stone angel is the most important referential object in the novel. Three major characters – the protagonist Hagar, her father Jason Currie, her son John Shipley are involved with the statue. What it means for each one of them and how they respond to it is important for both the readers and the critics. For Jason Currie, the statue displays his respect for his dead wife and proclaims his dynasty. It is a rich socio-cultural sign. Hagar's attitude towards the Stone Angel is ambiguous. It is linked with the mother whose weakness Hagar openly despises. It also embodies, for her, the paternal and societal values which she shares and is a symbol of Currie superiority. When she discovers that it has toppled over she is not only dismayed, she must set it up again. John has no reverence for the statue and the Currie greatness it represents. The stone angel performs a very important role in the construction of the novel's meaning and a structuring role in the expansion of the narrative. In the episode that shows the regeneration of Hagar the angel motif is again in the foreground.

The technical excellence of *The Stone Angel* is largely due to a web of intricate images. Muddy farmyards, skeletal machinery, Manitoba maples, prairie weather, Hagar's arthritic muscles and veins, the remarkable bird imagery and above all the stone angel serve as powerful images that convey the social and psychological implication of events, places and characters. For Margaret Laurence all writing is an exploration with a view to understanding oneself. For understanding oneself one has to understand one's background one's past because then alone can one get rid of the burden of the past and make some progress towards understanding others. Hagar confronts her past, analyses it and then alone she makes her limited entry into a world of joy and peace. Laurence also believes that a place, influences the writer in two ways. First the physical geography, its appearance, and second, the people. In her writing one can find both the influences of what she calls a "cultural background."

4.11 GLOSSARY

Oxymoronic:	Combination of contradictory terms so as to form an expressive phrase or epithet.
Semantic:	relating to meaning especially of words.
Polarity:	State of having two opposite poles: the condition of having properties different or opposite
Paradigm:	example
Iconoclast:	a breaker of images
Straddle:	favourable to both sides
Emblematizes:	to represent to the mind something different from itself
Adumbration:	foreshadowing
Expletive:	a word inserted to fill up a sentence or line of verse.
Plebian:	a member of a despised social class

Desecration:	an act of profanation
Apparition:	appearance
Concomitant:	he, who or that which accompanies.
Disjunction:	the act of separation
Syntagms:	a systematic body, system or group.
Silhouette:	a shadow outline filled in with black
Synecdochically:	by putting part for the whole, or the whole for part.
Metonymically:	a trope in which the name of one thing is put for that of another related to it, the effect for the cause
Intercession:	act of intercedings or pleading for another.

4.12 QUESTIONS

1. Do you think *The Stone Angel* is an appropriate title? Give reasons.
2. Give in brief the different meanings given to the stone angel by Hagar, Jason Currie and John.
3. What are the various functions the stone angel performs in the novel?
4. Comment upon the nature and significance of bird imagery in *The Stone Angel*.
5. What is the significance of the past for Margaret Laurence. How does Hagar tackle her past and what is the reward she gets?

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