

The Stone Angel: Search for Wilderness

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The Stone Angel, published in 1964, is Margaret Laurence's first novel which was written out of her Canadian background. The stone Angel begins the Manawaka cycle of Laurence. But, in chronology, it is her second novel in publication. The actual writing of the first draft of *The Stone Angel* was occurred in Vancouver in 1961 and the beginning of 1962. The novel was written during the time when her talent was forcing its choice upon her. After migrating from Canada to England, the first draft of the novel was finished. After distancing and detaching herself from Canadian background, *The Stone Angel* was published in England, America and Canada.

George Woodcock isolates four ways in which *The Stone Angel* has been important to the development of Canadian fiction. Firstly, Myths are to sustain our convictions which give us a figurative place to stand on. Secondly, it helped to shift the male voice of Canadian fiction to include female voices. Third is Laurence's experimentation with time structure opened up technical possibilities of Canadian novelists. Fourth is *The Stone Angel* articulated the theme of survival, which is main point to the development of Canadian literary identity.

As Usha Pathania quite rightly observes, "The Stone Angel delineates the psychic turmoil, fear and anxiety of Hagar Shipley who fails to relate herself to her husband and children. And, the unfulfilling filial ties and an uneasy matrimonial alliance turn her into fearful, suspicious old woman who is afraid of rejection".

In the words of M. F. Salat, "The fictional world of *The Stone Angel* is set in the period of her grandparents generation which was rooted in the stern puritanical values of rigid authoritarianism and hard work like the Somali men whom Laurence came to admire precisely because they remind her of her own Scottish-Irish ancestors"

The Stone Angel is a pathetic tale of the narrator and protagonist, Hagar Shipley who wanders in wilderness and undertakes a halting, unwilling, rebellious journey towards self-knowledge. Hagar Shipley struggles with darkness, being a victim of personal bias. Margaret Laurence aptly asserts her plight thus:

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In that sense, a part of Hagar had been dead for
Years through pride and her strict sense of
Dignity even before she was old and sick. But in
The hospital she has to come to grips with the
Reality of dying both physically and spiritually
Hagar's story is an attempt to survive as wholly
As possible, emotionally and mentally until the
Moment of death.

The novel relates, in the first person, the narrator and protagonist, Hagar Shipley, a ninety year old woman's fierce attempts to survive with dignity, toting the load of excess mental baggage that everyone carries, until the moment of death.

The fictional world of *The Stone Angel* is set in the period of her grandparents' generation which was rooted in the stern puritanical values of rigid authoritarianism and hard work like the Somali men whom Laurence came to admire precisely because they reminded her of her own Scottish-Irish ancestors. Laurence, however, had mixed feelings towards that whole generation of pioneers, as she says and the exploration of that inherited period of her past in fictional terms in *The Stone Angel* enabled Laurence not only understand it and come to terms with it but also to love and value it. However, since the past, she fictionalizes in the novel, is as much personal as a communal inheritance. Therefore, incorporates as an ideological proportion. It is owing to this "one of the great functions of art. The preservation of lost times and worlds is made in such a way that outsiders can imaginatively apprehend them".

The Stone Angel expresses the changing role of women's lives in the 1970's. Though her later works like the 'The Diviners' depicts very different roles for women than her earlier novels do. It is to say that Laurence throughout her career was faithfully dedicated to presenting a female perspective on contemporary life, most skilfully painting the choices and consequences of those choices. Women must make those choices to find meaning and purpose in life. A novel's success largely depends on its ability to maintain the reader's interest in the final outcome of the story.

Laurence creates a memorable character what is like to be very old, physically frail, depended on others and tormented by memories of the past. She also depicts the sudden dawning of she has gone wrong in life, and what has been the cause of her unhappiness. The novel *The Stone Angel* suggests there is hope that even those set in their ways can find the inspiration to change for the better, and that change, even at the last stage of life, is never wasted.

Hagar Shipley is ninety, when the book begins. Hagar Shipley wanders in 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 unrenowned with even pretence of sight”. She is grotesque with the fat ugliness of her old age, as her nature is twisted and distorted by the self-willed tragedies of her life. Stanley David in his edited work ‘Critical reflection on Margret Laurence’ writes in preface “The Stone Angel” is Hagar Shipley’s personal account of the last days of life. She is proud, bitter, sick and frightened old woman with a whip lash tongue to cut and mock. Life in The Stone Angel alternates between two time levels: the present and the past. The actual time-span of the narration is only a few days. Clara Thomas about the time span of the narration says:

The actual events of the novel take place over a short time-span-two, perhaps three weeks. But in the sharp struggle of her last days, Hagar recalls, defends, questions, and finally accepts and understand all the events and the feelings that have been important to her in her ninety years. 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 swatched the old.

In an interview she gave to Michel Faber, Margaret Laurence asserts that the major theme in *The Stone Angel* is that of survival. But here she goes to step further and conclude that “fitting into that theme and perhaps more important there is the sense of a possibility of a kind of redemption”.

The structure of *The Stone Angel* is replete with dualities. The dualities are Hagar in her old age and Hagar reliving her past. Hagar’s mother died when she was young. Hagar thinks that she had inherited the much cherished values of her father while her brothers, Dan and Matt, have taken after their mother. She thinks her mother was frail, docile and weak – willed. When she used to wonder, why Dan and Matt inherited her daintiness while she was big boned and husky an ox. Hagar is extremely conscious of the hard earned success of her father and her own position in Manawaka circles. Mocking at her house maid, auntie dolls desire to marry her father. Hagar thinks that her father could never have stopped to the level of marrying his housekeeper. Yet, she later rebels against the social hierarchy and despite the opposition of her father; she gets married to a farmer, Brampton Shipley. The rebellious and romantic spirit in her personality asserts itself only to be replaced by qualities of security, dignity and respectability. Hagar was sent out of Manawaka to learn how to dress and behave like a lady. When she returns after two years she knew embroidery, and French and menu planning for a five course meals and poetry and how to take a firm hand with servants and the most becoming way of dressing her hair unfortunately Hagar marries Bram, against all

opposition and sane advice, Bram, fourteen years older than her. He does not change even after his marriage to a cultural girl like Hagar. He does not stop hobnobbing with half-breed girls and puts in a little effort to improve his communication skills and manners. The rebellious and romantic spirit in her occasionally asserts only to be replaced by qualities of order, decorum, and respectability associated with Manawaka. Even after her marriage, she is unable to give up her class-conscious self-image and strongly disapproves of whatever Bram does. In fact, she likes to be remembered as the daughter of Jason Currie rather than the wife of Bram. The basic contradiction in their marital life is articulated by Hagar herself.

Hagar lives with her son Marvin and his wife Doris both aged sixties and lives in a house in Vancouver which she worked for and bought a house which is the sum of all her achievement. Hagar's immediate reaction to her son's proposal to sell the house is one of outrage even before she realizes that this would mean her going into silver threads, an old peoples' nursing home. The house's familiarity, its possessions, and the token it holds from her past—the oak chair that belonged to her father, Jason Currie, and the cut glass decanter, her wedding gift from Brampton Shipley. Hagar is still delight by gratification of the senses. In fact, she is often greedy of them. She loves the silk dress and tasty food, whatever the cost to her tired digestive system. 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 towards those who try to help her.

The present depicts old Hagar's determined efforts to refuse to accept her infirmity and avoid going to the Nursing Home for the old, silver threads, although it causes untold misery to her son Marvin and daughter-in-law Doris with whom she stays. Her selfishness does not allow her to recognise the fact that both Marvin and Doris are also getting on in years and do not have the necessary strength to take care of her. Hagar was out of sheer stubbornness and wilfulness that she has inherited from her father, Jason Currie, runs away to deserted fresh cannery from where she is rescued and hospitalized. And finally, when the past and the present have fused in the cannery and all the errors have been laid bare and admitted, there is still time in the short time left for Hagar for her to make some signal act of restitution. Sometimes Hagar moves between past and present with no logical connection, more often the past is evoked for her by some thought, some sight or sound in the present. Then, again, she will be jolted out of the reverie in the past by some pressure from the present, a sound or physical sensation that impinges on the reverie.

Laurence provides in this novel the metaphysical analogue to reckon with the Canadian of identity. The novel attempts to present the destructive efforts of imperialistic and subjugating social-cultural constructs on individuals. The dilemma and powerlessness of women, their tendency to accept male definition of themselves, their self-deprecating tone

and their inward rage reveal for Margaret Laurence the analogues plight and predicament of Canada itself.
