



The Mythical element of Margaret Laurence's "The Stone Angel"

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Laurence's last four novels are set in her fashioned village of Manawaka, a part of Canada that is based on her own childhood in Neepawa, Manitoba, and it is in these novels that we find the continuous flow of a created world that engenders and cultivates its own legends and mythology. Although each novel contains one set of character who are technically independent of those preceding them, we nevertheless encounter individuals and families whose stories have been told in previous novels. Since myths in one way or other sharpen or assert reality as Eliseo Vivas writes, "Myth making is a permanent activity of all men" and "all that men can do is to abandon one myth for the sake of another" (1970, 89 & 92). In this perspective myth often points to certain time tested beliefs and some universal co-ordinates.

INTRODUCTION:

An essential myth that Laurence seems to be shaping in her Manawaka novels is that of the family. Tradition has it that all members work collectively and cooperatively and out of this collective effort the individual members will develop and grow. The child was thus prepared for adulthood through the experiences of family solidarity; the son was considered mature when he becomes capable of assuming the role of his male able to assume her mother's maturity was confirmed when she was able to assume her mother's role. Although this description was crude, it nevertheless conforms to the outlines of the nuclear family myth as articulated and refined throughout Western culture, perhaps officially stated at first in the Bible, and certainly perpetuated in endless manner and mode by all Western societies.

Margaret Laurence's *Stone Angel* (1964) though often reckoned as a personal saga was truly a piece of history centred on the ever persistent quest for survival in an alien land viewed from the angle of a victim. Hagar Shipley may be a victim of her new surroundings, double displaced from Scotland and Manawaka, but never emotionally liberated from either. Her "garrison mentality" coupled with her pride prompts her to embark on odyssey of her own self leading the novel a mythical dimension.

Margaret Laurence, by using resourcefully both the traditional- separation, initiation, reunion (refinding) - pattern and the genesis stories, makes *The Stone Angel* a rich modern myth loaded on every rift with ore. The topical issue of identity (really quite traditional both in the east and the west) was given a mythical tinge. In the east it was said, 'give for your mother, kill your father', based on traditional wisdom and myths. In *The Stone Angel* this percept holds good. The feeble unseen mother is rejected by Hagar (though she loves her) and her life mission seems to be excel her self-made father, John Curie. "The daughter, however, has learned her father's lesson too well. She must reject him to be truly like him. Her husband is the one who shows her how to be free of a relational identity" (Williams 1991, 93). "I was Hagar to him, and if he were alive, I'd be Hagar to him, and now I think he was the only person close to me who ever thought of me by name, not daughter, nor sister, nor mother, nor even wife, but Hagar, always" (80).

Here was a mythical struggle for the preservation of untainted, undiminished feminine identity set against an unfriendly geographical space peopled with alien

ones. The mythical and the real are coalesced in a crucible of biblical alchemy. Hagar -Bram (Abram) story was erected on genesis, may be even subverted. However, the legendary, mythical lore lends prowess to **Laurence's** 'process', Hagar's memoir. Abram's first wife was dead. So there was no barren Sara for Hagar to mock at. There was also no Sara to drive her out into the wilderness. The problem of the child was still there.

"What could I say? That I'd not wanted children? That I believed ,I was going to die, and wished I would, and prayed I wouldn't? that the child he wanted would be his, and none of mine?"(100).

The mythical layer was subtly altered to permit the mother live; to be in, the husband, Abram drives the child Marvin into exile. When the promised child laic (John) to Sara by covenant was born to Hagar she becomes "an antitype, the Virgin mother" (Williams 1991,94). Hagar's inward terrain proves this point:

I wasn't frightened at all when John was born. I Knew

I wouldn't die that time. Bram had gone to fix a fence down by the slough. Such mercies aren't often afforded to us. I hitched up and drove the buggy into town myself... calm as a stout Madonna.

As **David Williams** observes, "There's the ultimate proof you're self – made. Even your husband can't make you. The invincible wife becomes the inviolable mother. By such means that bondswoman Hagar might achieve her own allegory. She will live happily ever after, without her husband. Death is not proud" (94).

The quest, almost in a religion – mythical vein, continues. Hagar is proud. She was strong. Her pride keeps her away from her father, husband and even sons. Her strength proves to be her hubris. Still she persist on a twin journey; almost like a mythical voyager across unchartered oceans. A journey into the geographical wilderness of her 'Newfoundland' and into her own nonagenarian self.

Hagar return to her husband on his deathbed, just to see him not to surrender. She scorns dependence. Even old age, sickness and death cannot conquer her. She remains a mythical heroine keeping intact her mighty will even when pitted against the convolution

of modern life. As **W.H. New** puts it, "Her final words, 'and then - ', uttered in the novel at the time of her death, are part of a chronology and therefore part of time. But by leaving the sentence unfinished, Mrs. Laurence closes the book in ambivalence; it is possible that time stops, but possible also that it goes on, and is merely measured in a different way" (X). Hagar's search was for a room of her own, for an independent life. It gains a mythical tinge, texture and structure steeped in reality. In the matrix of THE STONE ANGEL even death becomes 'an event', another episode in Hagar's story, a well – wrought urn built on the traditional quest myth; the garden myth of the priaries and Genesis. It was an invigorating 'romance' of myth and reality. "For the angel herself is transformed into Jacob. Her desperate quest for metamorphosis is rewarded at last. But only when she has faced up fully to her past like Jacob wrestling with the angel the night before he confronts his brother Esau" (Williams 1991, 99) Hagar's life is going to be preserved as truth, as myth, as in Genesis"

And he said, I will not let thee go,

Except thou bless me.

And he said unto him, what is thy name?

And he said, Jacob.

And he said, Thy name shall be

Called / no more Jacob, but Israel:

For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed....

And Jacob called the name of the place

Paniel: for I have seen

God face to face, and my life is preserved.

(32:26-8, 30)

CONCLUSION:

Laurence's handling of the maternal myth suggests a view of the nuclear family that seems peculiarly her own. Throughout the Manawaka novels the women are shown to be permanently changed and perhaps even tainted by the experience of motherhood, making it impossible to separate sexuality from maternity. Most Manawaka women allow their maternal concept

of self to over their lives, giving to it a dimension of authority that undermines and their sense of self into a better understanding of their own nature. There was a spiritual return in her Manawaka novels and she often explore the roots of a Canadian identity of the prairies through the eyes of her characters. Her characters move in time but at the same time transcend their times to merge with timelessness.

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