



The Depiction of Women's Pride in Margaret Laurence's Novel "The Stone Angel"

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ABSTRACT

"The Stone Angel is a convincing depiction of a person's final decline, but it also bears a message that we should not miss opportunities to take joy in ourselves and other as we can, lest we find ourselves unchangeable and loaded down with regret."

Margaret Laurence presents a realistic portrayal of life in the Prairie towns of Western Canada from late 19th Century to the Depression of 1930s. *The Stone Angel* revolves around the life and experiences of Hagar Shipley, a ninety-year-old woman. Using stream-of-consciousness technique, Margaret Laurence explores the troubled inner psyche of Hagar Shipley. She portrays her protagonists as *"strong women and their struggle for self-understanding and acceptance"*¹ is marvelous.

Keywords: Freedom, Women Pride, Consciousness, Responsibility

INTRODUCTION:

Pride is the deadliest of the seven cardinal sins proclaimed by the Holy Bible. In medieval and later Christian theology these sins were usually identified as Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger and Sloth. Among them, Pride was often considered primary, since it was believed to be responsible for the original fall of Satan from heaven. The Seven Deadly Sins were balanced by the Seven Cardinal Virtues. Three of these namely, Faith, Hope and Love are called *"theological virtues"* and are considered essential for reaching Heaven in the New Testament. *"And now abided faith, hope and love, the greatest of these is Love."*⁴ But Hagar's tragedy is that her guilt – ridden Calvinist character prevents her from totally accepting the fact that god is not fear but Love.

Having felt deserted by a cruel God for ninety year, *"She is unable to bring herself to beg for forgiveness, even from the more merciful deity she manages to conceptualize in her final days."*⁵

The Depiction of Women's Pride in Margaret Laurence Novel:

The Stone Angel is the first novel of the Manawaka series. It is a gripping story of marital discord delineating the psychic turmoil, fear and anxiety of Hagar Shipley the protagonist, who fails to relate herself to her husband and children. Hagar Shipley is a character who deserves a special place in modern literature. She is utterly unique and without parallel; she is a very difficult woman to like and has remained so for ninety long years. The unfulfilling filial ties and an uneasy matrimonial alliance turn her into *"a fearful suspicious old woman who is afraid of rejection."*⁶ On the other hand, it is also powerful portrait of a proud energetic and impulsive woman who wants to break away from her father, her spouse and eventually run away from herself. By the time we travel though much of her life in the novel, we see that there are few she has helped and cared about. With her ninetieth birthday behind her, she is not even sure that she ever felt love for anyone. She comes to recognize the damage she has done to her family and herself because other realization that *"Love [is] a end in itself rather than something subordinated to family and social forms."*⁷ Hence an attempt is made in this article to project the pride perspective which is predominant in Hagar's life and provide an insight into the nature of her character which is twisted and distorted by the self – willed tragedies of her life.

Hagar suffers from inner problems; Hagar is a victim of social circumstances. Some part of her problem relates to traditional society. When she travels to Manawaka, her attitude changes in a way reflected by the landscape. The novel shows the inner problems of Hagar and influence of outer landscape on her inner landscape.

The first indication of her pride is in the second sentence of the novel. Hagar explains the stone angel on her mother's grave as "my mother's angel that my father brought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty." (2) When Hagar encounters many problems on account of her pride, she seeks some place to hide.

In this situation forest brings peace for Hagar, when she senses her impending death and needs to find freedom to die. Her mind focuses on death when she feels her son and her daughter in law, Dorie, are treating her like "a calf to be fattened" (35), and a though "she were not there" (32). Hagar's pride and inability to communicate were formed in her childhood and throughout her adult years and must be death with if she wants to complete her quest. Hagar has some fault in her way to find her real self. Hagar is talking about her pride as a wilderness; she compare her inner feeling with the wild nature of Canada.

The novel begins with Hagar Shipley, the ninety year old protagonist, remembering Manawaka cemetery, an ironic garden of the dead, where the angel on her mother's grave signifies the corporate pride of "aliens in an uncouth land"⁸ and also marks Hagar's own pride. Of the stone angel, Hagar says: "my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim her dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day... She was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight."⁹ The word "unendowed with even a pretense of sight," mark Hagar's perspective about appearances and also that of her creator Laurence, for, she "is good at exposing the pretense of goodwill, the pretense of disinterested action that is, in fact, a monstrous egotism parading as unselfishness."¹⁰ Although Hagar, like the stone angel is tenacious and dominating figure who survives until she is ninety, this stone angel expresses the need for change. A shift from physical to emotional and spiritual survival has to take place and for Hagar, this means above all, the ability to give and to receive love. This is hard for Hagar to achieve because, she is caught between the

principles that her authoritative father had instilled in her and her final recognition that this heritage from the past has become too repressive to grant her the freedom she desires.

Hagar like her father followed the Calvinist heritage that upholds the God of the Old Testament, who condemns all to damnation except the predestined few. For Hagar's father, a pioneer battling for survival against a hostile wilderness, this religious ethos resulted in material success. Ironically, all the strength Hagar inherits from her father turns out to be her weakness. In the final weeks of her life, however, by wayfaring and warfaring through the Puritan methods of pilgrimage and battle, Hagar manages to move away from the Old Testament to the New by acknowledging the possibility of redemption and grace. Laurence's novels reveal that the struggle for wholeness and freedom is a spiritual enterprise that engages the character initially in a disturbing but ultimately rewarding journey towards self – discovery and renewal.

The novel moves to and fro through Hagar's memories associated with different phases lies in the fact – that, like Jane Austen's Emma, Hagar thinks a little too high of herself and her abilities. She is fastidious throughout her life and pays a heavy price by getting the awful truth that how her obsession with "proper appearances" scuttles her enjoyment in life. She says:

How is it I never could? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any 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. Of proper to whom? (261)

Hence, like her biblical namesake, Hagar wanders in a wilderness, all alone to maintain her independence by undertaking a rebellious journey towards self – knowledge and finally, a limited peace. By her name, she is linked to the Old Law of the Old Testament reinforced by punishment and exile. However, at the someone's life Hagar realizes that an outdated religion can thwart someone's life for which it is not entirely relevant at all and that only through self – discovery and compassion that one can experience the divine. Here Laurence seems to suggest that with sufficient psychological distance from the old religion, it is possible to reinterpret it without losing one's spiritual identity.

Furthermore, the actual events of the novel take place over a short – time span of about two to three weeks. In her old age, Hagar lives with her eldest son **Marvin** and his wife **Doris**, in a house in Vancouver. Hagar's wealth can be measured in terms of this house that she had gathered over the years. The house and its tokens from the past like her father's oak chair, her husband's wedding gift – the cut glass decanter are the only evidences of her identity for she says:

If I am not somehow, contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purpose, then I do not know where I am to be found at all (31).

But, her wealth in terms of spiritual possessions was nil for, she never tried to gather the joy out of her relationship as a wife, mother and grandmother.

Hagar is completely at the mercy of her physical debility and dead against its manifestation and yet, merciless towards those who try to help her. She is very uncertain on her feet and suffers urinary incontinence. However, Hagar's rebellious pride still refuses to accept the fact of her old age or the fact that the processes of time are irreversible, and that she must face death one day. Only Hagar's body changes, but her spirit is indomitably young, tough and brave. Her unchanging dark eyes symbolize the stubborn, flaming vitality that still burns in her. She says:

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 notice myself.... The eyes change least of all (33).

However, it is not only the unchanged eyes that matter to Hagar's perspective but also her unchanged and rigid attitude towards life.

The important characteristic of Hagar's personality is the pride that ruined her marriage and blinded her to the natures and needs of her husband and their two sons. Having lived in such wilderness for ninety long years, there is still some time left, although very little time for Hagar to make some signal act of restitution for she says:

I lie here and try to recall something truly free that I've done in ninety years. I can think of only two acts that might be so, both recent. One was a joke – yet a joke only as all victories are, the paraphernalia being unequal to the event's reach. The other was a lie- yet not a lie, for it was Spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a Kind of love (274).

Having said so much about Hagar's nature in general, it is of importance to trace the factors that shaped Hagar's thought and experiences in particular by analysing her varied memories from childhood through her marriage and eventually the hastening of her death. Although Hagar sails through myriad memories, only selective instances which are helpful in understanding Hagar's true predicament are analysed here in detail. Though the reader is familiar with these events from the beginning they are alien to Hagar herself until that final moment of truth and self – revelation.

The spirit of religion that Hagar has known since childhood, takes her from a terrible sense of sin and guilt, through confession and repentance, towards freedom and on to the acts of restitution. She still considers herself “*unregenerate*” (P.262), in the guilt - ridden terminology of her Calvinist upbringing. The pattern culminate as Hagar does lose her life to find it. Thus, Hagar was a tragic figure, a stone angel those eyes learn to see just before it was too late. Like the stone in the Manawaka cemetery, she was cold and a symbol of pride and not of love.

Later, her two gestures of love help Sandra Wang, the child in the hospital and Marvin her son to live. Getting a bedpan for the young girl and telling Marvin that he was “*a better son than John*” (P.272), are not so simple as they appear at first sight. Disregarding “*proper appearances*” and her own comfort, Hagar gets “*the shiny steel grail*” (P.269) for a girl in need, even more important are the convulsions of laughter she and Sandra share as they remember the look of the nurse's face. Disregarding her own need for reassurance and the idea that it was wrong to lie, Hagar tells Marvin what he wants to hear from her in order to live. Thus at the end of the day Hagar learns that there are no absolutes in life except love. She learns that sometimes a lie spoken with “*a kind of love*” (P.274) was better than the truth, that sometimes looking foolish shows more strength of character than an obsessive concern with proper

appearances. She seems to think that the good or bad of interfering in someone else's life depends on the motive and the attendant feeling as well as on the consequences of such interference.

Having committed the most deadly of the Seven Cardinal Sins, Hagar was guilty. The act of narration was an act of penitence and expiation for her. She learns from Lees that even his son was dead like John. They share each other's experiences through life. In this context, Lees was instrumental in showing Hagar the proper attitude towards life and of repentance and Grace. Though him Hagar comes to see that there are no absolutes except love and concern for others. That night when Hagar tells Lees about John died. This act purges her soul of guilt and she was consoled by Lees. Furthermore, Hagar realizes that it was "*a kind of mercy [she] encountered [Lees]*" (253) and that Lees gave her a new lease of life and changed her perspective towards death and God. Therefore, with her new perspective on life she moves on with Marvin who comes to rescue her and tells him what he wants and needs. This change in attitude was a deadly sin, was replaced by Love, which was a "*theological virtue*" greatly stressed upon in the New Testament. The Bible says: "*And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is Love*".¹⁵

Hagar's fierce pride was shown for the final time when a nurse tries to help drink some water. Hagar says "'Here, give it to me. Oh, for mercy's sake let me hold it myself!' I only defeat myself by not accepting her. I know it very well. But I can't help it – it's my nature. I'll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. I'll not countenance anyone else's era to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There. There. And then -" (308).

CONCLUSION:

Finally Laurence has given opportunities to the heroine whose courage has allowed her to resist surrendering to the patriarchal society. Hagar has returned to nature and her female self. For Hagar, memories of the place help to shape her real identity, this identity that brings her reaffirmation and reconciliation with her life. The Stone Angel is the story of the development of old Hagar's personal identities through her connection with nature.

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