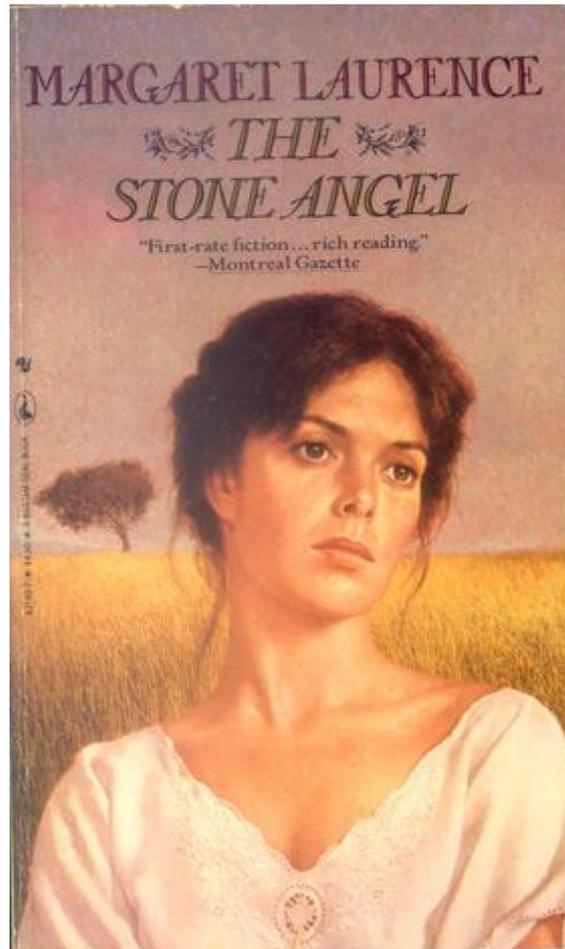


**The Influence of Manawaka in the Life of Hagar Shipley:  
A Study of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel***

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**Abstract**

Margaret Laurence is a short-story writer and an essayist of Canadian literature. She is one of the major novelists in Canadian literature. She is well-known for her Manawaka novels- *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *The Diviners* (1972), which are the classics of Canadian literature. Margaret Laurence has given much importance to the portrayal of background in her novels. The archetypal Canadian grassland town Manawaka, acts as a background

for her novels and it has a close resemblance to Neepawa, Manitoba where Margaret Laurence was born. It acts as a seminal control over the lives of all the major female protagonists in these novels. Initially, Manawaka values are considered as emotional repression, but during the course of their lives, they do recognize the Manawaka values. The novelist uses Manawaka as an essential perception to demonstrate the negative and harmful influences of a place that figure prominently in the personality of her characters for several generations. The present paper examines *The Stone Angel* and the existence of its vital character Hagar Shipley, who at the age of ninety observes that her being is shaped by Manawaka. Her personality is being influenced by the Manawakan values. At the last stage of her life she accepts the role of the reformer setting in motion the reorganizing of her independence.

**Keywords:** *The Stone Angel*, background, Manawaka, Puritanism, repression, Margaret Laurence, reformation.

### **Characters of Margaret Laurence**

Margaret Laurence has revealed enormous concern and has been very particular about the preference and illustration of background in her works. The level of acceptance of the characters of Margaret Laurence about environment is correlated to her knowledge of this place. Laurence's attentiveness is developed through her life experiences. It is observed in her writings that her place is the small exemplary Canadian grassland town of her time, Manawaka, has been created on the model of Neepawa, Manitoba where Laurence was born and brought up. It is an imaginary town that is used as a location for her Canadian based fiction, which is at times uncertain, but at the same time acts as an active force. Neepawa was settled in the late 19th century by the people of the Scots-Presbyterian background from Ontario. The Manawakan principles are based on Puritan background and the literary skill of Canadian literature is also influenced by Puritanism. Manawaka plays a major role in both the physical and biographical background of Laurence's novels such as *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers* and *The Diviners*. The Manawakan heritage acts as a link between the novels as well as the characters. Though the protagonists are very different in the aspects of life Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Morag belong to the product of the same background. They display a lot of comparable descriptions.

## Manawaka Background

Margaret Laurence describes her protagonists through diverse points of life from childhood to old age under different situations while taking into consideration the consequence of background in determining their living. The novelist highlights the personality of her protagonists and she intends to create living characters in her novels and the purpose is revealed in an interview with Don Cameron: “I realised quite quickly that what really grabbed me the most, what I really would like to do the most in a novel, was to, as far as possible, present the living individual on the printed page, in all his paradoxes and all his craziness”. (3, 11) Manawaka background gives importance to the simplicity in her works – the people and the place. Laurence look for the reader to experience the problem of her protagonist who is the creation of her own environment and is a “kind of juxtaposition . . . on the one hand repressed community, on the other hand a community in which the values of the individual were extraordinarily recognized, if only sometimes by implication”. (Interview with Cameron 3) She not only depicts distress and vagueness of a normal being in all her Manawaka novels, but also demonstrates the bravery and flexibility to fight back with the complication of life by defining Manawaka as “an amalgam of many prairie towns”. (“Sources” 82)

## Storehouse of Inherited Principles

Laurence seems to work against the faith of the opponents who see it as a remote settlement. Edward McCourt supports that “any native westerner who reads Margaret Laurence’s novels will be able to identify Manawaka as the town she grew up in” and to her it’s “exists primarily as an influence on the human spirit, a shaping force which either emancipates or stifles, gives peace to or makes mad its creatures” (108). Manawaka is seen as a storehouse of inherited principles. The women characters in her novels are subdued by the Manawakan morals but the novelist wants her reader to look below the exterior facade of her protagonists, their personality and to recognize the reason of inherited principles. Laurence unties the “discrepancy between private and personal selves” in F.W. Watt’s words in a review of *The Fire Dwellers* and it is mostly visible in her themes in all the Manawaka novels. (87) Manawaka anticipates its occupants to be conventional to the inherited common principles forced by their family as well as society, that are seen originally as a detention, but these have lifelong benefits as these bestow the people for generations with strong spirit that makes them to build up a highly verbalized susceptibility which further make certain of individual’s continued existence in difficult situations offered by life. Laurence uses it as a representation of barracks against Canadian grassland backwoods. She actually uses Manawaka as a primary

conception in all her Canadian works to prove the constructive and unconstructive pressures of a background that figure the experiences of people for several generations. She expects her reader to recognize the role of past in shaping the present as she states in her interview with Graeme Gibson: “I can’t believe that all of life is contained today, and the past goes back a long way”. (204)

### **Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel***

Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* is an elderly character and the most complex of all the Laurence’s Canadian women characters. In her last phase of life at the age of ninety, Hagar, feels and sees her past life is moulded by the Manawaka values. Her personality is being shaped by her Manawakan ideals. Hagar lived with her husband Bram away from the town of Manawaka and later with Mr. Oatley in the city, then with Marvin and Doris yet she recaps that the city had been only a “kind of home” since she left Manawaka; it implies that Manawaka has always been her real, her spiritual home. (SA 36) Hagar is lost in thought with the fallacy of a false and fictional life; the influence of Manawakan background has been seen in her actions and manners since her early days.

Hagar, the daughter of Jason Currie who is a proud man of Manawaka values the significance of externals and facades. She has been too much concerned about her own form, her character, social achievement and mode and order in everything. She herself admits it, “How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, like prissy Pippa as she passed”. (5) Hagar succeeds to Manawakan arrogance and appears to preserve and carry on her father’s public position. Manawakan principles not only prepare Hagar in her exterior form, they contain her emotions also. She becomes skilled at hiding her emotions or whatsoever seems a flaw to her. She hardly ever converses with any of her family members, even with her father as she was trained to keep away from real contact with others. She was taught sexual suppression; her father controlled her talking to men because he thought that they had “terrible thoughts”. (44) He teaches her to accomplish sublimation through – determination, hard work and “elbow grease”. (13) Hagar lives with Manawakan values throughout her life and gset ahead of them on to the next generation, but it does not counteract her unruliness against it. It is seen that Hagar has always been undecided for Manawakan principles. On the one hand, as a child she ardently follows her father’s Manawakan philosophy; on the other hand, she is disobedient against his values. In other words, she accepts as well as resists the Manawakan principles.

## Adherence to Manawakan Values

Hagar in *The Stone Angel* recognizes herself with untamed and zealous scenery as well as disproves the town proprieties. Her ambivalence towards Manawakan principles is exposed as she concurrently seems to defy as well as uphold those. This expands her difficulty as a character that remains with Hagar throughout her life and affects her relationship with others. She finds herself not capable to communicate herself to her father, brothers. She wanted to talk to Dan when he was on the death bed, but she could not and later she regrets, “If I had spoken and tried to tell him – but how could I?” (26). The fake model of not to expose herself in front of others has predisposed her relationship with her husband as well as her sons. To marry Bram, she fights against her father’s power, pleased happy with her husband’s good physical appearance, but it is very difficult for her to forget the ethics she learnt from Manawaka. She defines Bram’s family as, “They were all Mabels, Gladyses, Vernons and Marvin, squat brown names, common as bottled beer” shows her irresistible adherence to Manawakan values (32).

The cause for her disobedient attitude towards them in a way replicates a weakness for decency which Manawaka has created in her. Above all is Bram’s outrageous communal actions that outrages her most of the time. Bram is the person who is Hagar’s own choice but after marriage, it is very hard for her to keep hold of their association. She herself admits, “We’d married for those qualities we later found we couldn’t bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them” (50, 79-80).

Hagar’s efforts to maintain the principles which she herself disclaimed to marry Bram ultimately results in crumbling their marriage. It indicates that the conflict is not actually between Hagar and Bram, but it is the result of Hagar’s dual nature of character, the conflict is actually between Hagar’s preference towards decorum and unruliness. The real difference is between Hagar’s Manawakan standards and Bram’s lack of them.

Hagar finds herself powerless to run away from her Manawakan training even after her sons were born. She keeps living and raising her sons largely by Manawaka values and wait for them to take these forward. She trains her sons by teaching and imparting these ethics in them, by teaching good language and socially acceptable behaviour because of the fear that the lack of it may spoil her reputation society. Hagar retains her Manawakan values, even as an old woman, widowed by Bram.

She is still worried about outward form and shows preference to the things that shows her status, like the house and things kept in it. “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” (36).

## **Duality**

Hagar displays a strong intellect of societal modesty while mingling with others. She mocks everyone: Doris’ grammar; she does not spare Murray Lee for forgetting his manners and in hospital too, she emits out her irritation over women in a hospital ward for troubling her sleep and mental peace. Hagar continues to organize her feelings, even when she is in her last bed. Due to long sickness and old age, she is losing control over her body; she finds herself unable to strip off herself; her control over her speech and tears is also lost. Confined to bed and tied up Hagar is powerless and cannot even manage her physical needs. She feels extremely disgraced owed to loss of bodily and emotional control. Her incontinence worsens her condition and leaves her in total panic. It would be unjust to reverse the strength that she bequeaths from her strong Highlander associates. Her inherited superiority takes her further than the regular and gives her personal growth and individuality. She seems to equate her pride with strength of character when she says: “I prided myself on keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead” (81). She realizes her duality and the fact that only the exterior self is not real. When she sees herself in public mirror, she is scared and says, “Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant”. (133)

Hagar learns to settle the two contrasting warring forces lying in her and reveals personal growth. She recognizes that she has put on the mask of Manawakan mask and it certainly has cost her something very significant in her life and it is clearly shown by Laurence through the background of Hagar’s life. Hagar does not allow others to attack her isolation, she covers her real arrogance, but the gravity of honesty helps her to incorporate the aggressive forces residing in her mind since youth and it certainly proves extremely helpful to her to restate herself. Nobody can change oneself totally and abruptly, in the same way Hagar also keep hold on to some of her facade till death. She feels for having committed mistake against her sons by compelling them to accept the way she wanted them to be. She knows her faults and desires to alter her faults and die peacefully. She wants to release her tension and achieve salvation. Her old age, the physical and mental weakness makes her endeavour

more complicated and challenging. Hagar always substitutes physical pleasure with hard work. “Nothing to bless themselves with, they had, not a penny in the bank, a grey shell of a house around them, and outside a grit-filled wind that blew nobody any good, and yet they’d closed themselves to it all and opened only to each other. It seemed incredible that such a spate of unapologetic life should flourish in this mean and crabbed world”. (208)

### **Hagar’s Journey in Life**

Hagar’s journey to pacify her fault, to liberate her psychological stress that has arisen due to the realisation of her faults, her broken self is complicated by her physical and limited mind. It seems that her “escape route” lies neither in physical release nor in fancy because her Manawaka mask is a social one and it is expressed through her arrogance, management of others and above all through her conceit. Hagar’s pride had always been double-faced. It gives her power in time of adversity, courage to revolt against those values she does not want to imitate and to get the freedom she longs for; on the other hand, it is her weakness too, for it has destroyed her relationship with others. Now at the last chapter of her life she understands that it was her arrogance due to which she lost both her sons; it was the devil that grasped her and made her weak and susceptible. She repents: “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. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine?” (292) It seems that to release herself from the trouble and to expire quietly Hagar must go with religious signals that can be achieved through the resolution and modesty towards others.

Murray F. Lees gives up her location to her son, but she “blesses” him by forgiving him and it works wonderfully; she feels “lightened and eased”. (253) When she brings Sandra Wong a bedpan even at great uneasiness to herself, she experiences that her “paining laughter” is released and she has a peaceful sleep afterward. (302). In a fever of illness and vision, she talks with her sons and makes peace with them. She gets such reinforcement that she could have begged pardon of God that night. She expresses her feeling for John and shows her real gesture for Marvin too, “You’ve not been cranky, Marvin. You’ve been good to me, always. A better son than John”. (307,304) With the growing consciousness and realization that she has cost the contentment of happiness due to pride and exterior facade, she has made herself available to others and opens her heart that allows her to enjoy the rest of life in tranquility: “This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly and

with such bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that - - simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? . . . Every good joy I might have held . . . 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?" (292) it is apparent that Manawaka has been placed compulsory over Hagar and inflicted many constraints, but it gives her an intelligence of inherited power and safety with it as it shows her the way to revitalize and reassert her lost self.

Hagar's journey to backwoods, aggressive and disciplinary cannery and the sea – the alien and frozen planet, has extraordinarily played an important role in her conversion towards reiterating herself. The sea is related to the apocalyptic vision of hell and Frank Pesando in his article *In a nameless land* comments: "The use of Apocalyptic symbolism in the writings of Margaret Lawrence has termed it as "sinister". The place was full of overgrown wild plants, the chill sea was full of "sly-eyed serpents", monster whales and the "phosphorescent creatures dead to the day time" but Hagar took it in purgatorial terms". (224-25) D.G. Jones' in his article "*Butterfly on rock: A study of themes and images in Canadian literature*" comments: We view Hagar who visits these for her retrieval. She does exchange herself and forgives Mr. Lee and shows compassion and kindness for all after this container of purgation. Hagar must attempt to put together her disjointed self into her complete independence and recognize the position of her setting in compiling it. Hagar's religious resurgence has been attained as she has made several changes in her life by releasing her false and arrogant pretence. Even in her last stage, she displays the influence of Canadian background, the Manawakan trait and Hagar is: "unchangeable", "unregenerate". (SA 293) She has moved forward to reach her son, Murray Lee, and Sandra Wong including others. Like other Manawakan protagonists Hagar cannot achieve complete freedom from Manawakan inheritance – the rebellion against submissiveness, the independence that she exhibits in seizing the glass from the nurse.

### **Personality Struggle**

Throughout the story, Hagar's nature cannot help her to defeat her problem. Her pride which had always been having two different characteristics helped her to achieve the self at times of worries, but the same has made her a coward at times of finding a solution. The back ground of her inner world causes a lot of problem for her. Inner freedom for Hagar comes in the forest, when she finally finds her alliance with the community, the spiritually free protagonists depicted in Margaret Lawrence's Novel. She is able to identify with untamed and fanatical nature, and also was able to

disprove the thoughts of the local people. Hagar's duality and ambivalence towards Manawakan values is revealed as she simultaneously seems to flout as well as continue those. The compelled thinking, the unsteady mind and the unwanted pride has clearly showed the Manawakan nature influenced Hagar in a negative way. An understanding of the inner self and the final realization in the typical positive nature of the Manawakan protagonists who portray the nature of Manawaka through their characters is visualized here in this novel.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

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*The Stone Angel*