

A Thematic Analysis in The Novel *The Stone Angel*

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Abstract

*The most insightful story of Hagar in the novel *The Stone Angels* reveals the character's stubborn attitude and her final transformation which has provided a strong thematic perspective for the study. The story is a complete recitation of Hagar's whole life history nevertheless her life's incidents reveal about lack of many substances in her life. Incompleteness or Lack of something is the major theme of the novel which is suggested by the very title that the angel seems to be lifeless and has reduced to stone. Hence the study ventures on a search for the incompleteness present in the life of Hagar. The most notable quality that the protagonist doesn't process emotion which is highlighted by the author as an important character trait for women. Without emotion, Hagar is viewed as unusual and is pictured as antagonist. Moreover, the character Hagar's feministic attitude lacks certain smartness which leads to the failure. Thus, the paper makes a thematic observation to explore the theme of incompleteness in different aspects.*

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Feminism, Lack of Emotion

Introduction

The novel *The Stone Angels* has broken the boundaries of Canadian literature that the experimental writer Margaret Laurence who is known for her novels of characters especially in the Manawaka series has made an attempt to create a women character Hagar with stubborn and stern nature that she faces the challenges of society boldly. While most novels of the time focuses on the major social issues like racism, poverty, women suppression, etc, Laurence's central attention is on the development of many unique women characters. Hence, new themes of perception have been developed by the writer such as the psychological themes which explore the psychology of the central character Hagar whose life is incomplete by her unusual psychological behaviors. The novel also exposes a wide range of deficiency in Hagar's relationship with other mainly with her father, brothers, husband, sons and neighbors. Her resistance to gender role assigned by the society is the significant result of her psychological convictions. Hence, a thematic study in exploring the absence of certain psychosocial traits in Hagar and her feministic convictions forms the central concern of the paper.

The most notable among Canadian writers, Margaret Laurence has voiced for women who are caught in the clutches of the male-dominated society. All her contributions through literature have a lasting impact till the present days. Her most memorable works are *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-dwellers* and *The Diviners*. All these works have served as templates for the later writers. That some of her works have got translated in to other languages has given her recognition around the globe. Apart from her literary works, she has been instrumental in formulating the Writers' Union of Canada and the Writers' Trust of Canada in order to encourage the budding Canadian writers. All her contributions have been recognized by the Canadian government by naming her as a Person of National Historic Significance in the year 2018.

Her novels carry a peculiar style of writing that her birth place Neepawa, Manitoba has been modeled in most of her works as Manawaka which elevates her as a regional writer. Moreover, her skills in characterization have produced increasing number of novels of characters. Hence, all her women protagonists are remembered all time. She imparts psychological realism in most of her works since she is aware of the problems within women who undergo suppression by all means. Also she is concern towards social issues that emerge within Canada and the countries she had visited. She also applies a modified pessimistic first person point of view to some of her novels to limit the reading to the protagonist's consciousness. Hagar and Stacey of *The Stone Angel* and *The Fire Dwellers* respectively are examples of such accurate psychological portrayal who reveal their stubborn and frantic nature in different occasions. Laurence through her novels has introduced different kinds of women protagonist. In a way she tries to break the expectations of the society which has defined certain stereotypes that all women to have similar characters traits and behaviors within a social frame work. Hence, Laurence has made everyone to recognize that women of different kinds by characteristics and nature exist in all the society.

Laurence allude to biblical references that form the framework for her characters and events. Notably, the name she chooses for her character are biblical such as Hagar, Rachel, Jacob, Adamo etc. these inclusion adds religious connotations to most of her works. Hagar's reconciliation at the end is seen as a Christian redemption. Despite the Christian myths, injustices to women have been her focal point. Her major concerns are stereotyping of sex-role, inequality of opportunities for women, worst treatment of women by the patriarchy, women protagonists' consciousness etc. However, all her charges are not completely on men for women oppression. She has not taken the benefit of the doubt on men for granted.

The Stone Angles has been the first novel that elevates Laurence to the heights of praise and recognitions. It is published in the year 1964. It is the first of her Manawaka series of novels where she sets a microcosmic world for her other novels too. Hence the mythic heritage represented in the first novel has

been carry forwarded to the other ones without many descriptions. The protagonists of all four novels leave Manawaka which had been the childhood settings and they do so in order to search for identity and spiritual freedom. However their tradition and childhood comforts of the land couldn't be sacrificed by them at any cost. Critics claim the most striking theme of the novel to be survival. The survival is not reduced to mere physical survival but a protection of human pride and dignity. Laurence has envisioned in creating the fictional place where she links up the heredity and environment as an identity of pride. It is presented as a land where the protagonist's parents and grandparents lead strenuous battle to protect the frontiers. Their ancestors are stubborn and hard hearted in meeting dangers and threat. The successes of such people and the attempt in protecting their lands have become the pride and identity of the later generations. Hager who has descend from this background is naturally pride and stubborn. So identifying Hagar as stone angel is quiet convincing.

The story presents the life events of Hagar that happens in the last three weeks before her death. It is said in the voice of Hagar in a first person narration. In those three weeks, she reveals her 90 years of life experience in a long flashback. The whole novel is a confession of the protagonist. She is a well-educated, brave, willful, and confident woman. She is self-aware and self-reliant that she doesn't want to dependent on anyone such as on her father, brothers, husband or sons. She is almost a stone angel as suggested by the title that she never shows sympathy for anyone. However, at the end of her life she undergoes transformation. Her relationship with her family members, neighbor and society has a drastic changed in her final days.

The Ninety years old Hagar Shipley lives with her son Marvin and her daughter in law Doris. She is weak due to her old age. A doctor recommends admitting her in a nursing home. And so, Marvin plan to shift her to the nursing home. But, she resisted and plans to escape. With her old age pension check, she buys food and other stuffs and took a bus to Shadow point. She finds shelter in an abandoned building. She tries to isolate herself from the outside world. She opens her past to the people whoever she meets during the last three weeks. She reveals her life's incident

like the Mariner in “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” who tells histragic incident happened during the dangerous voyage to everyone he meets. The similar nature of Mariner and Hagar of being pride has been the reason for their troubles. Hagar meets Murray Lee with whom she shares about her son’s John’s accident. Lee informs Marvin and Doris about Hagar. Soon she is taken to the hospital. Initially, she dislikes the hospital environment where she lays in a ward which accommodates nearly thirty women. She feels no privacy but later she acquainted with them. She meets Elva Jardine who is from Manawaka and both exchanges news about Manawaka and people they know. Later Marvin and Doris tell her about her granddaughter Tina’s wedding. Hearing this she pulls out a sapphire ring from her finger and gives it to Doris as Tina’s marriage gift. Then she is shifted to a semi-private room where she meets Sandra Wong, a Sixteen year old girl who fears for the medication. Hagar comforts her. Finally Mr. Troy a clergy man visits Hagar and makes her to understand the reason for her unhappiness in life that is her pride. Hagar at the end has reconciled with her first son Marvin saying that he has been always good to her. The novel ends when she nears the death, holding a glass of water to drink which suggest it as a holy sacrament. It gives a picture that she appeals for redemption.

The major problems of her life are due to her pride that behaves stern and stubborn with family members and others as well in many occasions. Her pride starts at the large house where she is born. Her father Jason Currie being a stern and stubborn businessman had big fortune. Her family background itself has given her the sense of pride to her. In an occasion, she was stern and stubborn when her brother Daniel fell while skating. She remains adamant that she didn’t care him and eventually he died. Moreover, she has pride on her social status that is because of her high standard of education received from a convent school. In spite of her good education, she outsmarts in business management so her father wants her to take care of his large business but she neglects her father’s wish. Instead, she plans to become a teacher. Moreover, her pride has caused her to select her life partner against her father’s wish. She marries Brampton Shipley purely by the physical attraction. He is a middle class and alcoholic. But

after their marriage, she realizes he is no way equal to her in status and money. She even feels ashamed towards sexual feeling with her husband. She lost the high social status which she possessed when she was with her father. She couldn’t tolerate when something hinders her pride. She was not given her property share as she disobeyed her father. Her pride also caused her to get separated from her husband Brampton. During the 1930’s economic crisis, she faces big economic problem. So she has worked as a housekeeper at Mr. Oatley’s house. She had her second son John with her. Even during such tough time she has tried to maintain her pride. However, she returns to her husband when he was in his death bed. Her stubborn nature prevents her from taking care of him. Yet, John has taken care of his father till his death. Her pride has played in the life of her sons that he dislikes her first son. And when John opens his wish of marrying Arlene Simmons, she resists. However, he married her. At last, John died in an accident which she couldn’t digest. Thus her relationship with her family members is improper because of her stubborn nature that has driven her to failure.

Hagar shows no emotions and concern to anyone during her life time. It is evident from her childhood days that when her father has been whipping she resists crying. She was very tough to deal with from her childhood days. The father daughter relations ship remains as loveless transactions. If she has real concern to her father, she would have at least considered her father’s request of taking care of the business. Secondly, she doesn’t show concern to her own brother Dan in his death bed. He was in need of a mother’s affection during his illness which Hagar could have provided to him. Hagar’s brother Matt requested her to nurse Dan. He says,

“Do you know what he’s got in his dresser, Hagar?” Matt went on. “ an old plaid Shawl-it was hers. He used to go to sleep holding it, as a kid, I remember. I thought it had got thrown out years ago. But it’s still there.”

She dislikes imitating her mother because she is pride of her own strength. Her pride made her emotionless. Mariner was pride of his own skill and had shot the bird albatross similarly Hagar has cost the life of her brother. Thirdly, she shows no

emotion and sympathy to her husband because of his low status. She even resisted enjoying the sexual pleasure with her husband. She doesn't care her husband even at her last moments of life. She never shows love and affection to her first son. However, she lived with him just like a neighbor. Finally, with other people, she faces them with an upright look. She shows intellectual arrogance to everyone and especially to people who do not behave well. Thus she has no concern and love for anyone in her life that indicates she is highly self-oriented.

She lacks religious faith. She is neither an atheist nor having trust in a loving God. If she has developed religious faith, at least she would have developed sacrificial nature in her. Her lack of sacrificial nature is evident in many occasions. It pictures her as a more selfish and self-oriented person. She didn't sacrifice her pride during his brother's helpless condition. She was not ready to sacrifice her career goal when her father wanted her for his business. She was not in a position to sacrifice her status after marrying Brampton Shipley. She never finds a sacrificial model in her life yet she is not religious too. She makes comment on Christian beliefs that,

"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 jewelry."

It shows that she sees the world around in a materialistic aspect even the God. She demands a material benefit on everything so sacrificial nature is impossible to bloom in her.

Due to her uprightness, Hagar couldn't fulfill her feminine roles which are expected by the society. Traditionally, the gender roles that the society defines for women as daughter, wife, and mother are based on personality traits, domestic behaviors, occupations and physical appearance. Firstly, based on women's personality traits, they are expected to be emotional but Hagar shows not emotion through her entire life. Even she resisted crying when her father whipped. Secondly, based on women's domestic behaviors, they are expected to take care of children, household works. Hagar didn't take much care of her brothers, husband and children. Thirdly, in terms of occupation, women are expected to do less physical

works such as teachers, nurse etc. Hagar wishes to be a teacher but she worked as a housekeeper because of her poor economic condition. Finally, with regards to women's physical appearance, they are expected to be thin and grooming in a way men desires. Hagar had a grotesque appearance at her old age. It is shown in the novel that she give importance for appearance. She even married Bram for his good appearance. Feminist claims these qualities of Hagar as positive traits and those are the reflection of her empowered state. However, if these qualities are viewed through hyper femininity spectrum such looking women to be passive, soft, graceful, nurturing, accepting etc. are social stereotypes.

Lack of faith on others shows her alienated state. She has recognized the alienation only at her final days. She has withdrawn herself from being social because of her pride. She shows no sympathies for humans in her life time believing herself to be superior to all. She understands humanity when a girl gives space for her to sit while on the bus journey. Her lack of faith leads her to an unhappy life. She has no faith in God and faith in human beings as well. However, at her last part of the life, she has tried to reconcile with other. She dropped her pride down. She opened conversation with others She affirms Marvin that he has been good to her. She comforts the sixteen year old fellow patient Sandra Wong in her tough time. This how, she has tried to minimize her alienation. Laurence ends the novel with a spiritual note, that her faith in God and faith in human being is symbolized using her sacramental act.

One's life become complete and fulfilled only when all the ingredients of life have a perfect balance. The major ingredients of life such as showing love for others, understanding others problems, treating others equally, believing in other, having faith in God etc. are needed both in men and women. Hagar is stubborn, rebellious, willful, and refusal to her own feelings during her life. These qualities has covered he real emotions. She later realizes that Pride was her enemy. She acknowledges that by saying, "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear." However, she her life becomes complete when she accepts her mistake.

To sum up, when a man lacks emotions and feelings, his act is portrayed as masculinity and even celebrated. It is a hyper masculine behavior believing men to be aggressive, worldly, sexually experienced, ambitious, dominating etc. But, when a woman does the same she is pictured as arrogant and notorious. Hence, in Hagar's case, the society has to be blamed to develop such gender stereotypes. However, Laurence has attempted to break such stereotypes. By presenting such characters having unfulfilled the genders roles and having incomplete nature, Laurence has tried the recreate gender norms.

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