

# Stylistic devices in the stone angel novel

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## **The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence**

The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence is a heart-warming story of a ninety year old woman who is nearing death and who has very little to look back on with pride. Her life had been ruled by her concern of outward appearances and manners. Although she often felt love and happiness, she refused to show it fearing it may be viewed by others as a weakness. Hagar inherited this strong pride from her father, Jason Currie, along with other poor qualities. Throughout her life, Hagar is desperately trying to escape. First, she tries to escape from her family, mostly her father, but in so doing she also cuts herself off from her brother, Matt. She also ends up leaving her husband, Brampton. Secondly, Hagar tries to escape from her own poor qualities to which she is captive; attempting to fill the emptiness within her. Finally and futilely, she tries to escape death. All of these attempts fail dismally. Throughout the narration of the novel many images are put forth repetitiously to aid the development of Hagar's character and the main themes. The Stone Angel is a very effective story due largely to the biblical, water, and flower imagery.

The biblical imagery is very strong and can be found numerous times throughout the novel. The name of the main character, Hagar, is also the name of a hand maid in a biblical story. Many parallels are made between Margaret Laurence's Hagar and the biblical Hagar. The Hagar in the bible was to conceive a son with the husband of her owner, Sarah, who, herself, was unable to conceive. Hagar did bear a son but Sarah became very jealous of Hagar and had her thrown out into the wilderness. Hagar's son was born

and they both returned to the place where Sarah and her husband, Abraham Laurence's husband to Hagar was named Brampton to echo Abraham), lived. Hagar and her son were cast into the wilderness once again when Sarah bore a son of her own and Hagar's son, Ishmael, mocked Sarah's child. Nearing death, Hagar and her son were saved by God who provided them with a well of water. The Hagar in *The Stone Angel* is very similar to the Hagar in the bible. Laurence's Hagar became a housekeeper to Bram after she married him, which is ironic for a woman with her qualities. Hagar realizes this and sees herself as a bondswoman (this is also how the biblical Hagar is described); therefore, she feels trapped like a prisoner. Hagar says, "I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me," (pg. 261) thus showing Hagar as a captive of her position, emotions, and her pride. The two Hagar's are also very similar in that they both go into the wilderness. Hagar Shipley goes out into the wilderness when she leaves her father to marry Bram and live on his farm. The difference between the two Hagar's is that Hagar Shipley is not confronted by a divine manifestation like the Egyptian Hagar. Hagar's vision and realization comes when she and her favored son, John, leave home. Hagar slowly begins to see John's true character. Hagar Shipley wished her son was like Jacob, a faithful son in the Old Testament; however, she soon realized that he was not like Jacob. When Hagar returned to Manawaka, the statue of the stone angel had been pushed over and she requested that her son, John, fix it. Hagar says, "I wish he could have looked like Jacob then, wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no." (pg. 159). Hagar's second journey into the wilderness was when she fled to Shadow Point. Here, Hagar

realized that her other son, Marvin, was her Jacob and that she had favored the wrong son. The Hagar in the Old Testament bore a wild son, Ishmael, but she also created a faithful son, Jacob (descendent of Isaac). The parallels between The Stone Angel and the biblical Hagar are so strong that the effectiveness of Margaret Laurence's work rises dramatically.

The water imagery presented many times in the novel helped to develop the theme of death. As everyone knows, water is viewed as the center of life since, without it, life would cease to exist. An example of this is when the drought occurred in Manawaka. Hagar returned during the drought to find all of the Shipley's flowers and vegetables dead. "They'd had no water this year," says Hagar, not yet realizing that she, too, has lived most of her life in a drought. The water she was deprived of was that of a wild and free spirit that could express itself without restraint. Hagar experiences an actual lack of water when she goes on her sojourn at Shadow Point. She had gone shopping on the way to her destination and had forgotten to buy water. "I've not had a drop of water since - I can't remember how long it's been. A long time... Water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink. That's my predicament," (pg. 166) thinks Hagar. This had always been Hagar's predicament; life always surrounded her but she could never have a taste of what life really meant. Hagar's inner feelings and emotions had been dying of thirst all her life and now she feared she might physically die of thirst. After being found at Shadow Point, she was brought to a hospital where she was to die. As she lay in her death bed she requests a glass of water to quench her thirst and says as her daughter-in-law tries to help her,

“ I only defeat myself by not accepting her. I know this – 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 wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands.”

The drink of water symbolizes a cleansing of herself, of her guilt. Even in her final minutes of life her pride won’t allow her to accept her daughter-in-law’s help. This glass of water was an attempt at rejuvenating herself for life after death.

The flower imagery aids the story by showing the two opposing ways to live your life. In the novel there is imagery of wild flowers and of cultivated flowers. Much like people, some are wild and others are tame or predictable. Hagar lived most of her life like a cultivated flower. Her inner responses are natural and wild; however, externally she acts rationally and tamely in fear of her overall appearance being effected if she acted spontaneously.

Cultivated flowers symbolize death in that they are not permitted to grow freely and naturally, the very cause of their existence is being destroyed by their unnaturalness. The perfume “ Lily of the Valley”, which was given to Hagar by her granddaughter, Tina, was a symbol of death. Hagar says to herself, “ I would not expect her to know that the lilies of the valley, so white and almost too strongly sweet, were the flowers we used to weave into the wreaths for the dead.” (pg. 28). This was foreshadowing Hagar’s death).

Hagar held a high affection for lilacs, the flowers which grew at the Shipley place. These flowers were not taken care of and they “ hung like bunches of mild mauve grapes”. (pg. 25). Similarly, Hagar did not care about living a

normal, natural life, which caused her to be in miserable conditions, much like the lilacs. When Hagar returned to the Shipley place years later, all the flowers were dead. Her lilacs were “ burnt yellow, and the branches snapped if you touched them,” (pg. 150) and her marigolds, which she always took care of, were “ a dead loss”. (pg. 150). The death of her marigolds showed how creating life artificially will not work, since her marigold were cultivated continuously. Hagar’s life was lived artificially, with very little naturalness or spontaneity, thus she stifled her enjoyment of a free life for the sake of appearances. When Hagar went off on her final journey of self-discovery, she realizes she has led a poor, artificial life and although this realization has come very late in her life, she tries to do away with this pretentiousness. At one point Hagar takes off her hat which was “ a prim domestic hat sprouting cultivated flowers” (pg. 193) and replaced the hat with dead June bugs, in an effort to be natural.

There is other imagery (such as mirror imagery) which also helps to develop Margaret Laurence’s story; however, it wasn’t personally seen as powerful as the ones discussed. All the imagery throughout the novel helps the themes, characters, or plot to be more effective. The biblical imagery aids the development of Hagar’s character and the plot. The water imagery helps to establish the theme of death and to attempt the impossible – escape from death. The flower imagery showed the way Hagar lived her life and the way she should have lived her life. Margaret Laurence is brilliant in her use of imagery to further propel the strength of her story. Without this outstanding application of imagery, the novel *The Stone Angel* would not be nearly as powerful as portrayed.