UNIT 1 THE NOVELIST AND HER MAIN
THEMATIC CONCERNS

Structure

1.0 Objectives
1.1 Margaret Laurence - Introduction
1.2 Biographical Details – Early Years
1.3 The African Sojourn and its Influence
1.4 The Canadian Phase
1.5 Awards and Recognition
1.6 Main Thematic Concerns
1.6.1 Novel of Middle Class Aspirations
1.6.2 View of Fate
1.6.3 Development of Canada
1.6.4 The Quest for Understanding
1.6.5 Freedom and Life’s Meaning
1.6.6 Pride in Financial Success
1.6.7 The Theme of Exile and Communication
1.7 Let Us Sum Up
1.8 Glossary
1.9 Questions
1.10 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will acquaint you with the biographic details of the great Canadian writer Margaret Laurence and her major works. Although the most important thing about a writer is his/her work, yet the career biographies, tracing the development of the author’s canon and the evolution of his/her reputation make literature and its creators better understood and more accessible to students.

1.1 MARGARET LAURENCE - INTRODUCTION

Margaret Laurence is a writer of enormous stature who came out of the Canadian west at a time when the female prairie author was hardly recognized. W.H. New while writing of Margaret Laurence in his Literary History of Canada proclaims that the range and quality of her work made her the most recognized and accomplished of the writers of the 1960’s. Michael Peterson, in his introduction to a special issue on Laurence in the Journal of Canadian Studies writes, that for many Canadians she has “become an eminent, a wise and generous voice providing insight into and guidance for a highly self-conscious nation in the process of reviewing its complicated history and complex character.”

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Early years:

Margaret Laurence was born Jean Margaret Wemyss on 18th July 1926, in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa. Of Scottish ancestry, her father Robert Wemyss, also born in Neepawa was a lawyer of Irish ancestry, her mother Verna Simpson Wemyss was a talented pianist and music teacher. In 1930, at the age of thirty-four, Verna Wemyss died of a kidney infection. Her unmarried older sister Margaret
The Stone Angel

Simpson returned from Calgary, where she had been teaching, to look after young Margaret and eventually became her stepmother. With her Margaret Laurence's literary career had its beginning for they read many books and talked about literature especially about Canadian literature before it was taught in Canadian Universities and Schools. In 1933 Margaret Simpson and Robert Wemyss had one son. Two years later Robert Wemyss died of pneumonnia.

In 1938 Margaret Simpson Wemyss moved the family into her eighty-two-year old father’s house, where she cared for him as well as for two children. Young Margaret resented her grandfather’s rigid authoritarianism. His strength was her “constant challenge to battle,” as Clara Thomas has observed in her 1975 book The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence. “She was challenged, but certainly not crippled, by this old, still fierce and autocratic man; her step-mother’s supportive love and encouragement and her own strong spirit, well-matched to her grandfather’s strength were constant, counterbalancing dynamics towards growth and achievement.”

Six years later in 1944 Margaret Wemyss left Neepawa to take a scholarship at Winnipeg’s United College, a United Church arts and theology college affiliated to the University of Manitoba. During her college years as an honors English student, she had several poems and stories published in Vox, the under-graduate paper. At this time, as Laurence noted in the essay “Ivory Towers or Grassroots?” (1978), she also became involved with the Old Left, a group of supporters of social reform: “My sense of social awareness, my feelings of anti-colonialism, anti-authoritarianism, had begun, probably, in embryo form in my own childhood; they had been nurtured during my college years and immediately afterwards in the North Winnipeg of the Old Left.” The need to alleviate crippling social conditions that prevent man’s full realization of his dignity and humanity is a constant theme of her fiction.

Having completed her graduation in 1947 Margaret Wemyss took a job as a reporter for the Winnipeg Citizen, where she wrote book reviews, a daily radio column, and reports on labor events. On 13 September of the same year she married Jack Laurence, a civil-engineering graduate of the University of Manitoba.

In 1949 the Laurences left Canada for England, and the following year they went from England to Africa where they lived for seven years. In 1950 Jack Laurence was appointed Director of a dam-building project in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, now Somalia. After the initial stages of the project were finished in 1952, he felt reluctant to stay on when the remaining work could be done by a Somali engineer. From 1952 until 1957 he continued his engineering work in the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Their daughter Jocelyn was born in 1952; their son David was born in 1955. Shortly before the day the Gold Coast received its independence as the state of Ghana in 1957, the Laurences returned to Canada.

### 1.3 THE AFRICAN SOJOURN AND ITS INFLUENCE

The African years were a stimulating challenge and a formative influence on Margaret Laurence’s literary career. The opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture was a welcome contrast to the prairie world that pervaded her mental landscape. As Laurence puts it in Heart of a Stranger (1976): “The process of trying to understand people of another culture—their concepts, their customs, their life-view is a fascinating and complex one, sometimes frustrating, never easy, but in the long run enormously rewarding. One thing I learned, however, was that my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else. Living away from home gives a new perspective on home. I began to write out my own background only after I had lived some years away.”
Though Somaliland became the setting for only one early short story "Uncertain Flowering," published in Story 4 (1953), her two-year residence there is the subject of the haunting chronicle, The Prophet's Camel Bell (1963). Completed in Vancouver in 1962, a decade after her departure from Somaliland, the book is less a travelogue or diary than a vivid re-creation of the confrontation between Canadians and Africans, between a gifted artist and the beliefs and culture of a foreign nation. Beginning as a chronicle of her time in Somaliland the book gradually becomes a portrait of a people. Each episode is a re-creation and a creation, conveying the alien world with factual fidelity yet shaping the facts through art. Again and again Laurence returns in the book to themes that permeate her fiction. She sees the Somalis living by faith, not logic, their faith being a constant source of differentiation between herself and her new world. She writes "But for myself, it did not apply, this faith, perhaps because I had never needed it the way they did. I viewed it from the outside. As far as I was concerned, God was deaf. If we did not hear the sound of each other's voices no one else would." Love is a source of another telling contrast. According to her, "Love between men and women did not here contain the dichotomy long ago imposed upon it in the western world by the church, that of separating it, as though it were oil and water into elements labeled 'spiritual' and 'physical.' And the book records many examples of the Somali ability to find resources, both materialistic and mental, to ensure personal survival.

Fascinated by the extensive oral literature of Somaliland, Laurence began translating poetry and folk tales shortly after her arrival. Her work led to a volume of translation: A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose (1954), described in Laurence's introduction as "not the accumulation of the writings of centuries, but the stories of the highly imaginative race without a written language." When the book was republished in 1970, she reflected on its achievements in a new preface: "I suppose if I had known then the difficulties of translating literature, I would have not tried, but when a person is young and naive, one will try anything, and probably that isn't such a bad thing. These translations are amateurish... however, I think it was a good thing that the translations were done, partly because they constituted the first collection to be translated into English and partly because I think they do convey some sense of life and concepts of the Somali nomadic people... My main reservation about these remarks would be that I was in places unwittingly condescending in the manner of white liberals, out of pure ignorance, for Somaliland was my first contact with a culture other than my own, and I had much to learn about the validity of human differences—I still have, but at least I know it now."

Somali literature heightened Laurence's natural interest in the past and in the social and familial roots. Many contemporary African writers, she observes in Heart of a Stranger, "re-create their people's past in the novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value from which they were separated by two or three generations of colonialism and missionizing. They have found it necessary, in other words, to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being satisfied or threatened by that past." In another decade Laurence would have begun the arduous task of chronicling the Canadian past.

Laurence set two volumes of fiction in the Gold Coast. Her first novel, This Side Jordan (1960), and a collection of short stories, The Tomorrow-Tamer (1963). All her African fiction centers on independence, both personal and political, and rarely has an outsider captured with such pathos the struggles and causalities of an alien world coming into self-realization. The fiction shows characters caught between the biases of their traditions and the bid for liberation. Frequently there are clashes between the imperialists viewing with skepticism and bitter resentment the Africanization of their industries and the Africans detesting their arrogant and condescending employees.

The stories in The Tomorrow-Tamer were written and published individually from 1954 to 1962. Some have a first-person narrator, some have a third-person narrator,
yet each narrator is an outsider, exiled from some aspect of his natural world. The outsider may be an alien to Africa or he may be an African caught up in the new technology and rendered alien to his tribal values. The point of view in each story is that of an ironist, "not the ironist who assumes superiority of understanding or sophistication of intellect and so condescends to her subjects and characters," writes Clara Thomas, "but the ironist who sees at once the immense vitality and the enormous contradictions of joy and pain, hopes and achievements, among the people of an emergent nation." (The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence)

The chapters of This Side Jordan alternately concern the African protagonist, Nathaniel Amegbe, who though educated by Christian Missionaries and freed in his own mind from his tribal past, remains attached to the ways of his people, and the English protagonist, Johnnie Kestoe, the son of poor Irish Catholics, who has rejected his religious upbringing and come to the Gold Coast as an accountant in a textile firm. As their parallel stories become increasingly interdependent, the novel becomes a chronicle of war between native traditions and the values of the imperialist. Though the symmetry of the plot may be too neat, the novel has an abundance of carefully delineated and realistic characters set on a rich canvas that captures the complexity of social change.

The final dimension of Laurence's African writing is found in her critical study Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966 (1968). Here Laurence offers the best explanation for her interest in and indebtedness to African literature and culture: "Although Nigerians during the colonial period lost their own past, they never lost their land, for there were no white settlers as there were, for example, in Kenya. Whether or not this may have assisted them in maintaining some kind of inner strength and self-faith, it is impossible to know." Inner strength and self-faith are the goals of the protagonists of Laurence's fiction as described in her essay "Ivory Towers or Grass Roots?" "The themes of freedom and survival relate both to the social/external world and to the spiritual/inner one, and they are themes which are both political and religious. If freedom is, in part, the ability to act out of one's own self-definition, with some confidence and with compassion, uncompelled by fear or by the authority of others, it is also a celebration of life and of the mystery at life's core."

1.4 THE CANADIAN PHASE

When the Laurences left Africa in 1957 they took up residence in Vancouver, where they lived for five years. This phase saw Laurence complete most of her African fiction and write the first draft of The Stone Angel, but this time was personally and mentally trying. She was starved for the company of other writers, though she did make the acquaintance of Ethel Wilson, who offered encouragement and support. Her personal life was also trying, and in 1962 she separated from her husband, taking the two children to England where they lived first in London before settling the following year at Elm Cottage, Penn, Buckinghamshire.

Distanced from Canada, she returned to the draft of The Stone Angel, rewrote it, and saw it published in 1964. The first of five books set in the fictional prairie town of Manawaka, the novel regarded as a classic, announced the maturity of the talent evident throughout her African fiction, but her fiction was now rooted firmly and fully in her own Canadian world.

Laurence regarded herself as a member of the second generation of Canadian writers. The first generation including Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, Hugh Maclennan, and Ernest Buckler, rejected British and American models to write. Of these writers the most significant for Laurence's writing was Ross. As she remarked to Graeme Gibson in an interview for his Eleven Canadian Novelists (1973), when she first read
As For Me and My House (1941) in her midteens, she confronted a novel written “out of a prairie background which was very similar to mine, and I thought: it can be done.”

The influence of As For Me and My House on Laurence parallels the influence of The Stone Angel on younger Canadian writers. Jack Hodgins, for example, acknowledges the importance of the novel as the first he read with a voice and a world directly related to his western sympathies. From the time of the publication of The Stone Angel, Laurence has represented for younger writers a voice of intelligence and discernment, a Canadian novelist interested less in social realism than in the paradoxes of the human individual. Of his early days as a writer, Dave Godfrey has commented: “At that time, I was writing very assiduously for Margaret Laurence. I had never met her, but I had this idea of an educated, sensitive, experienced reader who knew the tradition of the story and recent developments and yet was a Canadian with a feel for myth and for all those repressions and fears which hang up twelve Canadians out of ten. So I wrote for Margaret Laurence.” (Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 53, Gale Research Inc. Detroit, London, 1986) p.265

The Stone Angel is Hagar Shipley’s personal account of the last few days of her life. With memory in a state of disordered energy, the ninety-year-old narrator unconsciously weaves episodes from her past into her painful present. The novel’s structure follows the process of her mind, the entire book being composed of flashbacks occurring in a progressive chronological pattern and alternating with scenes in the present. At the beginning, Hagar is blind, like the statue of the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery. All her life has been a display of pride as she struggles to hide her emotions and live in self-sufficient isolation. During a life time of wrangling she never learns how to express or to accept love; she tries to hide her inner failure, that she has never known the ability to rejoice. In the end, however her pride gives way to need. In Hagar, as Laurence has noted in an interview included in Donald Cameron’s Conversations with Canadian Novelists (1973), “part of her goal is simply survival to survive until the moment she dies, with some kind of dignity and some kind of human value. She always tried to put the hooks on people, to influence people, to manipulate them, her husband and her sons, and she has never really allowed them to go free, so she has never been free herself: this is what she comes to understand in the very last days of her life.”

Whereas The Stone Angel is set in Laurence’s grandparents’ generation her second Manawaka novel and winner of a Governor General’s Award, A Jest of God (1966), is set in her own generation. The narrator and protagonist, Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year-old single women, a school teacher, endures the long, hot summer of Manawaka. While resigned to the Presbyterian sterility of the town and the oppressive presence of her mother, she harbours a rebellious craving for love. Though her summer affair with Nick Kazlik, a schoolmate from early years who now teaches in Winnipeg, comes to an abrupt end, it has a positive effect to Graeme Gibson, “We are not God, but what Nick did for Rachel was to enable her to reach out, hold and touch another human being, which was what the sexual experience meant for her. It was the reaching out to another person and making herself vulnerable, as Rachel was able to do ultimately, with Nick, which led her to be able—to some limited extent—to liberate herself.” (Gibson Graeme: Eleven Canadian Novelists) Laurence’s novel served as the source of the 1968 Warner Bros. film Rachel and was republished as Now I Lay Me Down, during the same year.

The protagonist of the third Manawaka novel, The Fire-Dwellers (1969), is Rachel’s thirty-nine-year old sister, Stacey Cameron MacAindra who buys a railroad ticket out of Manawaka as soon as she has saved enough money. Now through a series of flashbacks, memories, fantasies, through a mingling of first-person and third-person narrative, she examines her tangled life in Vancouver. Instead of the anticipated enlargement of her personal horizon, she finds enslavement to her four children, her dull husband, and approaching old age. By the end of her mental journey, however, she sees the complexity of life and the problems other people face. No longer scarred
The Stone Angel

by life, she has the will to continue living. "The fire theme threads through the novel," Laurence commented in Heart of a Stranger, "the fires both inner and outer, and if we are to live in the present world, we must learn to live within the fires and still survive until we die."

While writing the three Manawaka novels Laurence was also working on a series of seven short stories, "fictionalized autobiography" as she called them, which were published separately in the 1960s. Adding one further story, she collected them under the title A Bird in the House (1970). The protagonist, Vanessa MacLeod, is another young inhabitant of Manawaka, and the stories follow ten years in her life that coincide in part with World War II. Though Vanessa is the narrator and protagonist, the center of the book is her hard, autocratic grandfather, and his centrality underlines the importance of the stories as cathartic autobiography. "I did not realize until I had finished the final story in the series," Laurence reflected in Heart of a Stranger, "how much all these stories are dominated by the figure of my maternal grandfather, who came of Irish Protestant stock. Perhaps it was through writing these stories that I finally came to see my grandfather not only as the repressive authoritarian figure from my childhood, but also as a boy who had to leave school in Ontario when he was about twelve, after his father's death, and who as a young man went to Manitoba by sternwheeler and walked the fifty miles from Winnipeg to Portage La Prairie, where he settled for some years before moving to Neepawa. He was a very hard man in many ways, but he had a very hard life. I don't think I knew any of this, really knew it, until I had finished those stories. I don't think I ever knew, either, until that moment how much I owed to him. One sentence, near the end of the final story, may show what I mean. — "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins."

In 1967, Laurence turned her attention to a children's book. That story became Jason's Quest (1970), which she has described as 'a gift' because of the rapidity with which she wrote the first draft. Jason, a mole, seeks a cure for the invisible sickness destroying Molanium and the molefolk. "Knowledge," he is told, "can be learned from books. But wisdom, now—wisdom must be learned from life itself." And the acquisition of wisdom has been central to the journey of many of Laurence's protagonists. In the late 1970s Laurence wrote three more children's books, The Olden Days Coat (1979), Six Cows (1979), Six Darn Cows (1970), and The Christmas Birthday Story (1980).

For more than a decade Laurence lived at Elm Cottage, though she made frequent visits to Canada. In 1969, when she accepted an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of Toronto, she had already decided to return to Canada permanently when her children completed their schooling in England. Shortly after beginning the Toronto position, she bought a small cedar cabin on the Otanabec River near Peterborough, Ontario, where she spent the summers of 1971, 1972, and 1973. The Diviners (1974), Laurence's fourth Manawaka novel and winner of her second Governor General's Award, was written partly in the winters in England, yet mainly during the Ontario summers. In 1973 Laurence accepted an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of Western Ontario. The following year she accepted a similar position at Trent University after she had settled permanently in Lakefield, Ontario.

The end of her decade in England and the beginning of her new residence in Canada also marked the publication of The Diviners (1974) a unique portrait of Manawaka since Morag Gunn, the forty-seven-year-old narrator and protagonist, is not a woman of Manawaka. She is an outsider, a girl who comes to Manawaka and later tries to escape from it, only to realize that escape can be solely physical. When Laurence suggested that this novel might be her last or at least her last about Manawaka, she was understating its epic significance, for the novel is the culmination and completion of her investigation of the town. Her investigation comes to an end with her employment of Morag, an outsider and a novelist. Here is Manawaka from the
perspective of the writer in Manawaka. And Morag’s personal search for understanding the pattern of her life complements a much larger ambition: *The Diviners* is an exploration of the role of the artist, and most important, the centrality of the past to the artist’s understanding of her own position in the flux of time.

Completed when Laurence herself was forty-seven, *The Diviners* is her *bildungsroman*, the novel that records the growth, education, and maturing of the individual, frequently with autobiographical overtones. Laurence’s early upbringing corresponds to the family life of Vanessa MacLeod, in *A Bird in the House*. The autobiographical dimension of *The Diviners* finds an embodiment of Laurence’s ideas about art and life in Morag. For Laurence, Manawaka’s creator, and for Morag Gunn, Manawaka’s historian in the fictional world, art is the distillation of the private and the fictional, and the mysterious process of literary creation provides the theme and the form of *The Diviners*. At the end Morag has summoned up all her past and discovers her own place in Canada: “This place is some kind of a garden… Nonetheless, even though it may be only a wildflower garden…” Like her creator, Morag transforms her garden into art. At the conclusion of her mental journey she “returned to the house to write the remaining private and fictional worlds, and to set down her title.” With its final setting in eastern Ontario, *The Diviners* is Laurence’s farewell to Manawaka, “that prairie town—which is partly my own town and partly a town of the mind.” The epic dimensions of Morag’s reliving of her life and, through stories and ballads, her ancestral past give the novel a quality of finality and summation that makes it a natural conclusion to its creator’s imaginative involvement with the prairie town. Two years after the appearance of *The Diviners*, Laurence’s collection of critical and autobiographical essays, *Heart of a Stranger* was published.

### 1.5 AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

Laurence’s efforts and her talent have been widely recognized over the course of her career. In addition to her two Governor General’s Awards, she has received the Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award (1961), three president’s medals from the University of Western Ontario (1961, 1962, 1964), a Molson Prize (1975), Periodical Distributors’ Award (1977), and a City of Toronto Award of Merit (1978). Laurence has been named companion of the Order of Canada (1971), fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1977), and recipient of honorary degrees from United College (1966), McMaster University (1970), Trent University (1971), Dalhousie University (1971), University of Toronto (1971), Carleton University (1974), Brandon University (1975), Queen’s University (1975), University of Western Ontario (1975) Simon Fraser University (1977), York University (1980), and Victoria University (1982). In 1981 she accepted a three-year appointment as Chancellor of Trent University.

When Margaret Laurence died on January 5, 1987 she had published sixteen books along with many poems, addresses and articles in journals, magazines and newspapers.

### 1.6 MAIN THEMATIC CONCERNS

#### 1.6.1 Novel of Middle Class Aspiration

Despite Laurence’s left wing sympathies, despite her growing desire to address issues of dispossession and social injustice, *The Stone Angel* is very much a novel of middle class aspiration, action, and folly. Proud descendent of a family that could claim connections, a lapsed Scottish baronetcy, and self-made success in pioneering Canada, Hagar Shipley has little time for the larger questions of social order and justice. Though she oscillates like a pendulum between her personal impulses, so strong is her ethic of self-reliance that she fails to see clearly the plight of the farmers
she knows during the Depression of the 1930s or the sense of loss, and desperation of the local Metis of Manawaka. Indeed, the novel very carefully suggests that Hagar’s blindness to the larger issues of social justice is typical of many people of her generation. As close as she was to the actual effects of the Depression on farmers and to the Metis friends favoured by her husband Bram and her son John, she steeled herself against any potential awareness of or empathy with such experiences. Her “respectability” threatened by them, she needs to hold herself aloof from, superior to the “bunch of breeds and never-do-wells and Galicans” she is obliged to feed during harvest time. Pride both blinds and sustains her when her social identity is questioned.

1.6.2 View of Fate in The Stone Angel

*The Stone Angel* is a study of a feisty individual forced to endure circumstances grotesquely at odds with her self-image. It enacts a capricious view of fate and presents fate as an amalgam of character and circumstance, the two forces interacting in a complex manner. The individual is certainly the victim, (in Laurence’s phrase in *The Stone Angel*) “of the jokes or jests of God”. These “jests” however, often have their root in individual character. In Hagar’s case, “it is the pendulum like oscillation between impulses of order and disorder, respectability and passion, dynastic pride and individual need that dictate the unfolding of her life and characterize her blindness.” *(Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* p.77) God’s great joke is that “one discovers so many things too late”, most notably the wilderness that pride can make of a life and the self-enclosure that is the outward aspect of self-reliance. It never occurs to Hagar to ask the serious question “why” when it comes to the tyranny of social circumstances.

1.6.3 Development of Canada

In her Canadian fiction, by attending tenaciously to the tight-fisted, unyielding, and proud Scottish spirit, Laurence touched a major nerve in the Canadian sensibility. Though *The Stone Angel* is unabashedly middle-class, Scottish and small town in its emphasis, it still captures something essential about the energy, enterprise, and mad pattern of the settlement and development that have characterised not only the growth of Manitoba but of Canada as a whole. The Scot’s middle-class outlook incarnated in Jason Currie and passed on to his rebellious daughter, is the firm base upon which, in her later Manawaka novels Laurence was able, without inconsistency to integrate her developing left-wing concerns, particularly her empathy with the victims and the dispossessed who had been cast aside in the provinces and the country’s growth. Michael A. Peterman rightly argues that the recognition of *The Stone Angel* “Suggests the success with which Laurence shaped her novel to present a compelling version of formative stages of Canadian identity. In linking her vision to that of her friend, historian W.L. Morton, she assimilated Morton’s work with her own experience and the past of her people.” *(Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* p. 80) Laurance cites Morton’s *Manitoba: A History* as the “book about my land that has meant the most to me”. “When I first read(it)”, she adds, “it was with a tremendous sense of exoitement, combined with an angry sense of having been deprived, when young, of my own heritage. I have since done a great deal of reading of prairie history, but it was Morton who first gave me the sense of my place’s long and dramatic past”. *(Books that Mattered to Me 1981)* In *The Stone Angel* the dream of dynasty, in itself both compelling and destructive, becomes a map of Manitoban and Canadian heritage.

1.6.4 The Quest for Understanding

*The Stone Angel* is permeated with an unflagging quest to know more to understand better, to recover and recognize what is best and most worthwhile in human experience. Michael A. Peterman says that in *The Stone Angel* “the process of and the emphasis upon recovery, the struggle to understand what has eluded knowing is made heroic, heartening and significant”. (as quoted by Clara Thomas in her article
Clara Thomas looks at *The Stone Angel* as a valuable study of the enclosed “garrison culture” of North American settlements and of the religion that supported and often distorted the spirit of their people. She argues that the overwhelming question at the heart of *The Stone Angel* is “one of many-prismmed conflict, between the individual’s needs and demands and society’s, between God’s law and man’s understanding and interpretation of that law, between the rule of the community and the rule of the heart, between pride and love”. (“Pilgrims Process: Margaret Laurence and Hagar Shipley”)

### 1.6.5 Freedom, Faith and Life’s Meaning

Once when asked about other novelists’ influence on her work Laurence could give just one name – the name of Joyce Cary. Cary was a religious novelist and the overarching themes of all his works are freedom, faith and the revelations of life’s meaning and purpose that come as gifts of grace. Shortly before his death, he described his purpose thus: “What I set out to do was to show these people, living each in his own world by his own ideas, and relating his life and struggles, his triumphs and miseries in that world. Their situation, in short, was to be that of everyone who is doomed or blessed to be a free soul in the free world and solve his problems as he goes through it...” (*The Writer and the Theme*) Margaret Laurence has written and spoken of freedom as a major theme in her work, but she has publically explored the foundation of her writing much less than Cary did and she has shown the workings of faith and grace in her character’s lives rather than writing theoretically about these things. She believed with William James that “to be converted, to be regenerated to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong and inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.” (*The Writer and the Theme* p.78) *The Stone Angel* while charting the life span of Hagar describes such experiences and their effect on her.

### 1.6.6 Pride in Financial Success

When Hagar Shipley was a child in the 1880s, Manawaka was still close to its beginnings, with board sidewalks, oil lamps, a few successful businesses such as Jason Currie’s store, institutions such as the well-tended cemetery, the everpresent undertaker and the churches, especially the Presbyterian church:

I’d be about eight when the new Presbyterian church went up. Its opening service was the first time Father let me go to church with him instead of to Sunday School. It was plain and bare and smelled of paint and new wood, and they hadn’t got the stained glass windows yet, but there were silver candlesticks at the front, each bearing a tiny plaque with Father’s name, and he and several others had purchased family pews and furnished them with long cushions of brown and beige velour, so our few and favoured bottoms would not be bothered by hard oak and a lengthy service.

“On this great day”, the Reverend Dougall MacCulloch said feelingly, “we have to give special thanks to those of our congregation whose generosity and Christian contributions have made our new church possible.”

He called them off, the names, like an honour role. Luke McVitie, lawyer, Jason Currie, businessman, Freeman McKendrick, bank manager, Burns MacIntosh, farmer, Rab Fraser, farmer.
Father sat with modestly bowed head, but turned to me and whispered very low: “I and Luke McVitie must’ve given the most, as he called our names the first.” (The Stone Angel, p.15)

Pride in financial success, in “getting ahead” was inextricably linked to religion in Hagar Currie’s Manawaka. The isolation of small groups of people in a vast land was one of the factors in the growth of a town’s personality; in English Canada the other factor was the drive to build a progressive, successful and Protestant community. Ideals of godliness and business enterprise were closely meshed, especially so for those whose religion incorporated the old, passionately-argued Calvinistic doctrines of predestination and of the elect. Though these grim articles of faith were considerably less than ramrod strong in Canadian Presbyterians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there still existed a residual, crude but powerful belief that the elect of God, the saved, shone by their works and, therefore, the man who succeeded in the world’s terms by his own labours had also succeeded in God’s terms. His outward success was the sign of his favoured status among the elect. Hence Jason Currie’s unremitting drive for success, his pride in it and its link to his religion:

He was a self-made man. He had started off without a bean, he was fond of telling Matt and Dan, and had pulled himself up by his bootstraps.... The devil finds work for idle hands. He put his faith in homilies. They were his Pater Noster, his Apostles’ Creed. He counted them off like beads on a rosary, or coins in the till. God helps those who help themselves. Many hands make light work. (The Stone Angel p.8)

1.6.7 The Theme of Exile and Communication

Margaret Atwood, one of the most formidable and well known writers of Canada states that “Margaret Laurence was no bulldozer. Nor was she the least bit interested in being a legandry figure; she was far too involved in the joys and desairs of being human.” (Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature) The most important and unique talent given to human beings is the ability to communicate. But it is easier said than done. No wonder an important theme running through all the African or Canadian works of Margaret Laurence is the experience of foreignness, of the special self-recognition that comes to exiles, of the difficulty of communicating over cultural barriers. In Somaliland when she could not find any other reading material, she read for the first time the five books of Moses in a Gideon Bible. The lines “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were stronger, in the land of Egypt.” lingered on, echoing through Margaret Laurence’s career, summarizing much of her experience as a stranger, and taking on a new relevance when she found that “my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else.” (Heart of a Stranger p.11) Certainly the Somali experience, as it affected Laurence herself and other Europeans, underlies the pre-occupation with exile, from one’s own land from one’s adopted land, even from a traditional way of life in This Side Jordan and The Tomorrow Tamer. Always behind these stories about exiles or misfits or people thrust out of their traditional ways by the forces of change, there lurks deeper strangeness which comes from the difficulty of human communication of any kind. While writing about Chinua Achebe’s preoccupation with communication she ends her study of him in this way, “there is one theme, which runs through everything he has written – human communication or the lack of it. He shows the impossibly complicated difficulties of one person speaking to another, attempting to hear—really to hear—what another is saying. In his novels we see man as a creature whose means of communication are both infinitely subtle and infinitely clumsy, a prey to invariable misunderstandings. Yet Achebe’s writing conveys the feeling that we must attempt to communicate, however imperfectly if we are not to succumb to despair or madness.” (Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature)
The difficulty and the necessity of communication is not only the major theme of such novels as *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers*, but is also a leading preoccupation of the principal characters in each of these works.

### 1.7 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Wemyss Laurence grew up in Neepawa, Manitoba, a small town northwester of Winnipeg. Her roots in Neepawa go back to the beginning of the town and its pioneers. Her mother died when she was four and she lost her father when she was ten. Until she went away to the United College in Winnipeg, she lived with her grandfather her step-mother and her brother. She started her writing career with the publication of poems and stories in *Fox*. She wrote for the newspaper and the radio also. She got married to a Civil Engineer in 1947 and in 1949 left Canada for England. The following year the couple left for Africa where they lived for seven years. The African years not only gave her an opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture they exerted a formative influence on Laurence’s literary career also. Living away from home gave a new perspective on home. She was fascinated by the extensive oral literature of Somaliland. Somali literature heightened her interest in the past and in the social and familial roots as they help an individual in recovering a sense of self, an identity and a feeling of value. In Africa she translated poetry and folk tales. Laurence left Africa in 1957 and lived in Vancouver for five years. During this period she completed her African fiction and wrote the first draft of *The Stone Angel* which was ultimately published in 1964. With the publication of *The Stone Angel* her fiction now rooted firmly and fully in her own Canadian world. Laurence regarded herself as a member of the second generation of Canadian novelists. From among the first generation of Canadian writers, she found Sinclair Ross most significant. As a Canadian novelist she was interested less in social realism than in the paradoxes of the human individual. *The Stone Angel, A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers* are known as the Manawaka cycle. *A Bird in the House* is a series of short stories, “fictionalized autobiography” as she called it. Her fourth Manawaka novel *The Diviners* is a unique portrait of Manawaka since Morag Gunn, the protagonist is not a woman of Manawaka. *The Diviners* is an embodiment of Laurence’s ideas about art and life. The merits of Laurence’s works and her talent won two Governor General’s Awards along with many more and has secured for her a place of pride in the history of Canadian literature.

### 1.8 GLOSSARY

**Condescending:** to descend willingly from a superior position.

**Imperialist:** pertaining to, or of the nature of an empire or emperor.

**Presbyterian:** a religious body formed by the union of the secession and relief churches in 1847, included in the United Free Church from 1900, and in the church of Scotland from 1929.

**Buildungsroman:** a novel that records the growth education and maturing of the individual, frequently with autobiographical overtones.

### 1.9 QUESTIONS

1. How was Margaret Laurence benefitted by her sojourn in Africa?
2. As a second generation Canadian novelist what are the favourite themes in Margaret Laurence’s fiction – both African and Canadian?
3. What are the main thematic concerns in *The Stone Angel*?
1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


