UNIT 2 HAGER AND THE THEME OF SELF-ALIENATION

Structure

2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Hagar Shipley - A Character Portrait
2.3 The Stone Angel as Vollendungsrroman
2.4 Self-Alienation of the Elderly and The Stone Angel
2.5 Let Us Sum Up
2.6 Glossary
2.7 Questions
2.8 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is twofold: to introduce and discuss the enigmatic yet fascinating character of Hagar, the protagonist in The Stone Angel and to establish how this classic work, by making the ninety year old Hagar its heroine, has joined the newly emerging literature that deals with the lives of the aging and the elderly.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Clara Thomas in her pioneering work Margaret Laurence argues that the deepest well of Laurence’s creative vision is her interest in and understanding of human beings, her respect for them and her compassion for their everlasting terrors. The Stone Angel the first of Laurence’s Manawaka works has received more critical attention than any of her other writings. Opinions are divided as to the success of the novel’s technique but critics are unanimous in their praise for Laurence’s creation of the novel’s central character, Hagar Shipley, who reigns as queen of all characters in Canadian literature. According to Professor Read “Hagar... finally transcends fiction to the world of supra-reality inhabited by literature’s great characters.” He further remarks “It is the creation of Hagar Shipley that clearly marks for me at least the emergence of Margaret Laurence as a fine novelist. For the first business of a serious novelist is the creation of character. When any character slips, almost imperceptibly perhaps, beyond the realm of obvious fiction into the works of reality then the summit of the novelist’s art has been achieved. Such is Hagar. She belongs in that great company that begins with Chaucer’s Monk and Pardoner, Prioress and Wife of Bath and stretches through the works of the great, down to our present day. At times vicious and vulgar, irascible and prideful, stubborn and independent, she is by no means lovable; but she is capable of profound feelings and in the end demands respect.” (A Place to Stand On, p.42) Laurence agrees with Virginia Woolf’s famous assertion that the novel exists above all to express character because only there, can the drama of life, and reality itself be seized. For Laurence the novel strives “to catch vast and elusive life.” To put down life or one’s consciousness, fiction must dramatize the intimate, vital, and contradictory working of the human mind. A great literary work portrays the “human individual” who is inherently paradoxical amazingly strong yet often weak—the source of both wonder and pity. It celebrates his or her uniqueness by exploring his or her inner most being. This is what Margaret Laurence has done in The Stone Angel.
According to Michael Peterman, Hagar is characterised in terms of the prairie. She lives as a struggling farmer's wife for some twenty-four years, a rugged kind of experience known by none of Laurence's other Manitoba born but town raised protagonists. Having endured the deep rooted quarrel of her marriage and having struggled to raise her children often under difficult and impoverished conditions, Hagar feels much put upon and threatened by others in The Stone Angel. "I've never had a moment to myself, that's been my trouble," she thinks, but her real trouble, which she struggles to understand and to put into words, is that "she is strangely cast." Hers is a temperament torn between impulses of order and disorder, refinement and toughness, propriety and desire and impulses justified in her own mind by her pride in her family and the urgency of her own passions. The struggle of her last days is not only a struggle to maintain independence and control: it is an almost "inadvertent plumbing of the junkyard of her memory." In so doing she finds herself at last able to measure the extent of her misjudgements of those closest to her and to break out, to some small extent, of the prison of her nature.

Like her biblical namesake, Hagar wanders in a wilderness and like the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, the prairie town where she grew up, "she was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight." (p.3) At ninety, when the book begins, she is grotesque with the fat ugliness of her old age, and her nature is twisted and distorted by the self-willed tragedies of her life. She is a proud, bitter, sick, and frightened old woman with a whip-lash tongue to cut and mock, even at herself. Above all, she is "rampant with memory"; and she is still, and desperately, rampant with life. We share in her last short and bitter struggle to maintain her independence; more important, we share in her halting, unwilling, rebellious journey toward self-knowledge and, finally, peace.

The actual events of the novel take place over a short time span—two, perhaps three weeks. But in the sharp struggle of these last days, Hagar recalls, defends, questions, and finally accepts and understands all the events and the feelings that have always been important to her. She moves from the present to the past and back again, with an ease that is completely familiar to those who have listened to and watched the old. The anxiety, lest she confuses past and present and so prove herself to be as "queer" and incapable as her own son and daughter-in-law think her to be, is familiar too. To one caught up in her struggle, her climaxing, temporary defeat-and-release in irrationality, when she confuses past and present and speaks the healing, forgiving words to her companion in flight (whom she mistakes for her dead son, John), is quite simply, unbearably moving.

Hagar lives with her son, Marvin, and his wife Doris, both of them well into their sixties, in a house in Vancouver which she worked for and bought: a house which is the sum of all her achievements. Its familiarity, its possession, and the tokens it holds from the past—the oak chair that belonged to her father, Jason Curie, the cut glass decanter, her wedding gift from Bram Shipley are the only solid evidences of identity that Hagar now possesses: "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I may be found at all." (p.36)

But she is ill, stabbed with a pain under her ribs that grips her without warning: grotesquely fat and uncertain on her feet; sometimes incontinent; unable to care for herself and yet resentful of Doris and Marvin's fussy care and bumbling concern; completely at the mercy of her physical debility and revolted at its manifestations; and yet merciless toward those who try to help and capable of merciless honesty toward her physical self: "I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribed over the face with an indelible pencil. The skin itself is the silverfish white of the creature one fancies must live
under the sea where the sun never reaches. Below the eyes the shadows bloom as though two soft black petals had been stuck there. The hair which should by rights be black is yellowed white, like damask stored too long in a damp basement.” (p. 79)

Hagar is repellent physically and just as ugly in her cruelty toward Doris, “That Doris, ... she heaves and strains like a calving cow.” (p. 31) and blind and mistaken in her judgement of Marvin “There is a boy who never gets upset, not even at what happened to his own brother. (p. 65)” But she demands and compels sympathy, a grudging admiration and the tension of partisanship which one always accords the gallant fighter fated to lose. Only her body has aged: her spirit is indomitably young and brave. “I never got used to a single thing,” she says: and her unchanging dark eyes symbolize the stubbornly vital, flaming spirit: “for 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 remember and to notice myself... The eyes change least of all.” (p. 38)

The sensual aspect of Hagar’s character refuses to change. Hagar at ninety is still delighted by her senses’ gratification. In fact she is often greedy for them. She loves colour: the back-garden yellow with forsythia; her lilac silk dress, “a real silk, mine. spun by worms in China, feeding upon the mulberry leaves.” (p. 29) She grudgingly admires Doris’ food and heartily enjoys it, whatever the cost to her tired digestive system. “I eat well. My appetite is usually very good. I have always believed there could not be much wrong with a person if they ate well. Doris has done a roast of beef, and she gives me the inner slices, knowing I like it rare, the meat a faint, brownish pink. She makes good gravy, to give her due. It’s never lumpy, always silken brown. For desert we have peach pie, and I have two helpings. Her crust’s little richer than I used to make, and not so flaky, but quite tasty nevertheless.” (p. 67)

Colours, sounds, smells come to her as vividly as they ever did, from her past and from her present; and the old woman is still almost miraculously identifiable as the same Hagar who had begun to enjoy sex very soon after her marriage, though she was too proud to let Bram, her husband, know it. When she had finally taken John and left Manawaka and Bram, “I’d waken, sometimes, out of a half sleep and turn to him and find he wasn’t beside me, and then I’d be filled with such a bitter emptiness it seemed the whole of night must be within me and not around or outside at all. There were times when I’d have returned to him, just for that.” (p. 160)

Clara Thomas rightly argues that it is an enormous affirmation of living and feeling that Hagar makes, and to its energy one cannot help responding. Nor can one help a response compounded of pity and wonder at her stubborn gallantry and at the pathos and irony of a recurrent double-exposure image of Hagar—old, ugly, chained, and earthbound by her physical disintegration and young, vivid, strong, as untamed as a hawk: “yet now I feel that if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take, it by surprise I would see there again that Hagar, with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the raising ring, the young ladies’ academy in Toronto.” (p. 42)

Hagar lives in battle, pitted against everyone who comes close to her and, tragically, she betrays them all—her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons, even John, the younger one, whom she loves and would have helped. But by that time her pattern is set and she does not know the way. The pride that destroys her relations with others is established in the first paragraph of the novel as her father’s error also. Like her father’s enormous will, Hagar’s too is directed towards mean objects, towards “getting ahead” and being a name and a force in the microcosmic, claustrophobic world of Manawaka.

She takes and treasures the ancient battle-cry of the Currie clan, “Gainsay who Dare.” but ironically, her “daring” is the destructive defiance of her marriage to Bram Shipley, against her father, against the town which she pretends to despise, and very
The Stone Angel

shortly against Bram himself. She thinks her son, John is heir to the old spirit of the battle-cry, but she betrays him in the name of “common-sense” and “getting ahead.” So John dies, daring all right, as does Arlene whom he loves; but in a stupid, pointless, drunken dare—in hopeless rebellion against hostile circumstances which Hagar has partially contrived.

William New describes Hagar as an essentially tragic figure, and her moment of truth as the deepest point of her tragedy. “Joy is for the Sarahs of the world; but she is Hagar. Her identity will not allow it.” (Introduction p lx) Patricia Morle does not endorse this view of Hagar. According to her this interpretation of the biblical archetype slights the tension in Hagar’s character. It also disregards the novel’s tragicomic tone and most important, Hagar’s movement towards freedom in the closing chapters. “Tragic narrative ends in the isolation of the protagonist, while comedy depicts the social integration of the individual. Integration includes an advance in self-knowledge.” (Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home)

The closing chapters chronicle Hagar’s gradual reconciliation with her world and herself. At Shadow Point, where Murray Lees’s story of losing his infant son in a fire releases her memories of John’s death, Hagar speaks to Murray the apology she owes to her son. Sensing her confusion, Murray plays John’s role just as Hagar’s brother Matt had taken on their mother’s role when Dan died. In this replaying of the past, Hagar is permitted to tell John/Murray that his lover Arlene is, after all, welcome in their house. Hagar’s descent into her shadow self, a kind of rites de passage, ends with repentence, confession, and peace: “I could even beg God’s pardon this moment, for thinking ill of Him sometime or other.” (p.248) In Laurence’s words one can almost equate inner freedom with growth. While Hagar fails to reach this inner freedom she is never a pathetic victim. Although she is too old and obdurate to change, she does come to understand herself—her pride, her fear, loneliness and her lack of freedom. At the end she recalls doing only two “truly free” acts, which she calls a Joke and a Lie. Clearly, Hagar refers to fetching the bedpan for the girl in her hospital room; and blessing Marvin, assuring him that he has been a better son than John and stands first in her affection. These two acts are altruistic, directed outwards in the effort to comfort another person.

Hagar’s free acts are actually far more numerous. They include many small gestures in the closing chapters. Hagar gives her sapphire ring to her grand-daughter Tina. She forgives Murray for betraying her hiding place in the cannery. She thanks the clergyman, despised earlier, for singing in the hospital and tells Doris that she has done her good. This is not to say that Hagar’s pride is banished. She calls herself unregenerate: “the same touchiness rises within me at the slightest thing.” (p.293)

Towards the end of the novel Hagar admits that she always wanted “simply to rejoice” (p.292) But she never could do that because “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 touch. Oh my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years.” (p.292) The Stone Angel does not end in this revelation though it is the tragic climax for Hagar, the moment of truth for her and for the reader, the moment of a cathartic release. There is, in the short time left before her story ends, time and opportunity for her to take the steps towards restitution which she needs and to accept the evidence of love that she has always wanted. Marvin cannot rise above the hackneyed common place in speech, but Hagar, who always despised his inarticulateness as she hated his father’s vulgarity of language, can now see through the words to the spirit and is, at last, able to rejoice.

A pause, and then Marvin replies.

“She’s a holy terror,” he says.

Listening, I feel it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness. (p.305)
A strongly-marked sacramental pattern moves with benign irony through the novel. The spirit of the religion which Hagar had known only in an emptiness of form takes her through repentance and confession, from the prison of self to the moment of knowledge pointing towards freedom, and on to the simple but single acts of restitution which do give her a sense of freedom. And the pattern culminates as Hagar does lose her life to find it, in the splendid, strongly-marked symbols of the final lines—a fighting, dying, stubborn old woman, a glass of water, the cup of life, the grace of God: “I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There There And then…” (p. 308)

Life does not often offer us such a rounded completeness of pattern, though life does most strangely answer the demands of the will. Fortunately, there is art, opening up glimpses of the whole, burning away fear and pity to make places for acceptance, charity and the power to go on.

Symbolically, Hagar is, of course, a wanderer in the wilderness through her own willfulness. Like the biblical Hagar, the second wife of Bram Shipley, resents and despises the memory of the first one just as the biblical Hagar resents Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Bram Shipley, with his failure farm, is no patriarch—though sadly and ironically, he wishes to be one and hopes their first child will be a boy: “It would be somebody to leave the place to,” he said. “I saw him with amazement that he wanted his dynasty no less than my father had.” (p. 101) Hagar flees Bram and the farm and lives self-exiled with her son John.

Hagar is a tragic figure finally redeemed. But more than that she is real, with an energy of presence that does burst the frame it is held in, to communicate its power, its pathos and its vitality directly, like a blow or a sharp cry. She is also, as her story begins, grotesque, as the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, erected from pride and not from love. Hagar’s is a grotesquerie within the real, not beyond its bounds in fairy-tale. Hers is a distortion of normality, the form monstrous without its appropriate spirit, only with hard-won humility does she moderate from enormity to humanity. Patricia Morley rightly argues that, “Seeking freedom, Hagar forges more chains, seeking community she builds psychic walls. Her final self-knowledge accompanies the breaking of these bonds, as Hagar is released into love, death and the new life suggested by images of rebirth and transformation”. (Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home)

George Eliot spoke of the process of writing a novel as a movement towards conceiving “with that directness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of self.” In her conception of Hagar and in her telling of Hagar’s story, Margaret Laurence has done just that—and her subject required the particular directness which Laurence commands best. Hagar exploited a talent that rushed to her creation with the flamboyant vigour and perception and completely answered the requirements of Hagar’s total reality.

George Woodcock calls Laurence a “Canadian equivalent to Tolstoy.” Both writers, Woodcock argues, have a panoramic sense of space and history, an ability to preserve lost times and worlds so that outsiders can imaginatively apprehend them. He argues: “... their characters are as impressive as their settings, and their best revelations are achieved not... by explicit statements of historic themes, but rather by the vivid, concrete yet symbolic presentation of crucial points of instinct in individual lives, such as... the moment in Margaret Laurence’s The Stone Angel when the despised minister, Mr. Troy, sings the first verse of the Doxology to Hagar Shipley during her last days in hospital...” (A Place to Stand On)

Woodcock concludes that Hagar’s recognition of her need to rejoice and her inhibiting pride are intensely personal, yet at the same time one can generalize her situation into a description of the state of mind of a whole generation of English
speaking Canadians. To quote Patricia Morley again: "Hagar Shipley is the first in a series of memorable women. In five closely connected works of fiction Laurence presents universal concerns in terms of Canadian experience over four generations. She allows us to see into the hearts of her individual characters, their society, and ourselves." (A Place to Stand On)

To provide us an opportunity to peep into the psychic tumult of her protagonist Margaret Laurence opts for the first person narrative. It can be a limiting device in the hands of a lesser artist but Laurence uses it to the hilt as it provides her an opportunity to reveal to the reader more of Hagar than she knew herself, as her judgements about everything are so plainly and strongly biased. For the same purpose the flash-back method is employed. Laurence believed that the flash-back method suited an elderly protagonist who lives largely in the past. The chronological structuring of Hagar’s memories provides clarity and unity to the novel and an immediacy to the past. A more pressing reason for depending on Hagar’s voice is its poetic quality. Laurence admits ‘I finally came to the conclusion that even people who are relatively inarticulate, in their relationships with other people, are perfectly capable within themselves of perceiving the world in more poetic terms. So I let her have her way.” (“Gadgetry or Growing…p.6)

2.3 THE STONE ANGEL AS VOLLENDUNGSROMAN

Vollendungsroman as defined by Constance Rooke is the novel of “completion” or “winding up.” The Stone Angel is regarded as the central or prototypical example of the genre, for a number of reasons. One of the most distinguishing aspects of “Vollendungsroman, in The Stone Angel is the kind of alliance between the elderly character and the author—as language itself becomes the agent of affirmation,” says Rooke. (Crossing the River. p.3)

A special intensity (resulting from the proximity to darkness) characterizes the Vollendungsroman. The writer’s imagination is challenged by the prospect of the character’s demise, and by the need to “capture” a life before it vanishes. Behind this, and quite apart from the question of the author’s own age, is undoubtedly the spectre of the writer’s own aging and prospective death. Writing is always an act directed against death; it may become that more specifically and more urgently when the writer’s subject is old age. Thus, we feel strongly the need that Laurence feels to let her elderly protagonist speak “before [her] mouth is stopped with dark”.

The act of speech operates in the Vollendungsroman in several ways. Broadly or metaphorically speaking it is all of the writing performed on the protagonist’s behalf by the novelist; more literally, it includes the inner (silent) discourse of the protagonist; finally, of course, it is all speech performed out loud by the elderly protagonist. Speech of this most literal kind may be divided further. Often there is something that must be said to other characters in order to free them for their own lives; this is illustrated by Hager’s statement to Marvin that he has been “good to [her], always. A better son than John”. (p.304) And it is typical of the Vollendungsroman that the truth of this crucial speech is gone. An imprecise formulation—even a lie, though Hagar speaks more truly than she knows—is not only preferable to silence, but all that can be hoped for. If Hagar fails “to speak the heart’s truth”, she fails in part because we all necessarily fail—and because language fails always. Still it is what we have. Through language, we communicate some portion or version of “the heart’s truth” and so become visible, assuming a more or less reliable shape in one another’s eyes—so that Marvin, in his turn, can remark to the nurse that his mother is “a holy terror”, (p.304) and Hagar can feel this accolade as “more than [she] could reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness.” (p.304) However imperfectly, Hagar and Marvin connect in
time through language and such moments have a heightened importance in the Vollendungsroman, where time is running out.

It is also characteristic of the Vollendungsroman that the elderly protagonist is tormented by the memory of characters who have died before some vital message could be delivered or received. Thus, Hagar wants Bram to know she loved him and wants John to know that she regrets the plot to separate him from Arlene. And it is too late. But The Stone Angel, like other Vollendungsromans, supplies amelioration through delayed and displaced speech, as figures like Murray Lees appear to take the words that Hagar needs to give. None of this can change the damage she has done to others in the past. “Nothing can take away those years”, as Hagar knows full well, unleashing the savage irony that she hears in the minister’s words of comfort. Yet language can begin to repair the damage Hagar has done to herself. Speech acts, exchanged with surrogate figures, help her to see what might have been and what she is capable of being even now. They collapse time, even as they enforce its tragic necessity, and reveal to Hagar her continuing potential for connectedness in the human family. They point both to the past in which she might have spoken thus, and to the present in which she does.

Hagar thinks that she is “unchangeable, unregenerate. I go on speaking in the same way, always” (p. 293) thus her problem with speech is as much with what she says as what she fails to say, and her problem is that in both ways she separates herself from others. Following this self-accusation, however, Hagar withdraws her dismissive remark about the minister—“We didn’t have a single solitary thing to say to one another”—and admits to Doris that “He sang for me, and it did me good.” (p. 293) Interestingly, the hymn that Hagar had requested of Mr. Troy is the one “that starts out all people that on earth do dwell”, (p. 291) thus the “single solitary” state of alienation and failed speech is pierced by chords addressing all. The song here—as often in the Vollendungsroman—seems to bridge the gap between silence and speech, bringing into consciousness the individual’s yearning for community. It propels Hagar into the kind of recognition which occurs most frequently for the elderly protagonist, a need to shake off the “chains within” and welcome joy.

Words that are delivered to surviving characters, messages that are routed to the dead through intermediaries (so that the elderly character may be delivered from the burden of silence or mistaken speech), talk in which the aged protagonist may exercise a freer version of the self—these are some of the speech acts that point toward affirmation in the Vollendungsroman. Always, they are imperfect or imprecise. But that is necessarily the case, since the Vollendungsroman negotiates between speech and silence, between the lived and unlived life since desire is never satisfied. What seems to matter is that it be expressed.

Hagar’s life has been more mistaken than most—her story more unspoken and misspoken—but the distance she feels between what her life has been and what it would have been is entirely typical of the Vollendungsroman. Constance Rooke has coined this German neologism for the novel of old age, of “completion” or “winding up,” with a certain measure of irony, since a characteristic of these texts is the recognition that human projects are never completed. Time runs out, as pages do. Only rarely does such a text conclude with a ringing endorsement of what the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson refers to as the old person’s “one and only life.” The Stone Angel, in which Hagar is struggling desperately to change and grow, in which categorically she refuses to gloss over her mistakes and deprivation, is a typical case. Art here reflects and seeks to compensate for the incompletion of a human life.

Simone de Beauvoir, however, in The Coming of Age, takes a very different view of the uses of the elderly in fiction: “If an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for ... Nothing that can happen to him is of any importance.” (Essays in
honour of Margaret Laurence. p.210) Novels like The Stone Angel prove her wrong. But what is particularly striking in this statement is the notion that elderly protagonists cannot engage our interest if “dealt with in [their] subjective aspect.” For this is exactly the “aspect” of old age that contemporary fiction chooses to reveal. When the closed subject becomes an open book, when the mask of stereotypical old age is torn away and the icon stirs, when the elderly character in fiction is allowed to reveal herself as subject, we discover that indeed there is “development to be looked for.” In the case of The Stone Angel, that development is “looked for” by all—author, character, and reader.

The Stone Angel gives us the elderly protagonist from the inside. A cantankerous old women, Hagar Shipley is an obstacle and a problem for her family; but we take her side to a remarkable degree, because we are given access to it. We see what Hagar says and does and the effect she has on others—and much of that we would judge harshly; but because Hagar is allowed to tell her own story, because we enter her consciousness and live there, we can respond to her more fairly. We learn to value her rich sensuality and the free play of her wit; we see the other side of the coin, the capacity for joy, all the positive qualities that have been so tragically denied in Hagar’s presentation of self to the world. We come to understand as well the social, familial, patriarchal, and puritanical—which have led her to this distortion. And that very pride which we deplore in its outer workings, as well as for Hagar’s sake, is revealed to us as a means of survival.

Constance Rooke argues that the subject of old age is a powerful one for other reasons too. The invisibility or marginalization of old people, their reduction to stereotype, their occupation of a zone behind the mask—all of this provide special impetus to one of the writer’s most crucial drives, which is to see other human beings clearly. The indignities suffered by the elderly—as their bodies betray them, as memory fails, as social power is stripped away and condescension mounts—may also stimulate the writer’s need to proffer dignity through art. Any reader of The Stone Angel will recall how Laurence moves us inexorably from a puerile assumption of the “we”—“Well, how are we today? he inquires” (p.277)—to a truer sense of the tribulations of old people.

Questions such as these relate to the elderly person’s claim upon a writer’s empathy or compassion. But the elderly character is also attractive for a number of more ‘technical’ literary reasons. To begin with, she makes available to the writer nearly the whole span of a life history—as opposed to just that truncated, glibly predictive bit before the heroine decides whom to marry. She picks up the human story at a pivotal and richly dramatic point, when the evaluation of life seems most urgent, and when the old dramatic question of what comes next is most especially poignant. She may also function for the writer as a touchstone (and victim or champion) of social attitudes that have shaped our past and that operate still, even in a climate of radical revision. All of this, Hagar clearly does.

The Stone Angel is a prototypical example of the Vollendungsroman also in its extensive use of the most characteristic imagery of old age. Consider, for instance, the image of the house with which Laurence plays so elaborately, in using “tonehouse” as Aunt Doll’s surname (to forecast Hagar’s tenure as housekeeper in Mr Qatley’s Stone House) and in having Marvin sell housepaint (to imply an interest in appearances, which Hagar forsweats when she claims the weather beaten house at Shadow Point as her own). Laurence begins her manipulation of this image with the old woman’s characteristic fear of dispossession. The house is then developed as an image of the self, the societal construct and the body. What Hagar must do in preparation for her death is what Saul Bellow’s elderly heroine in “Leaving the Yellow House” and countless others must do. She must wean herself from that cocoon, that entrenched idea of the self, and “admit” the forces of nature. Understandably, she is afraid. Her fear of intruders in the house is the fear of death that Laurence explores in many strands of the novel’s imagery.
Other images that are typical of the Vollendungsroman include the sea (which is opposed to the house, as the site of dissolution and rebirth) and the transitional identification of Hagar as a gypsy (who makes her home in nature). Angels as figures poised between two worlds, as messengers and mediators—are also surprisingly common. Another is the mirror, which Laurence uses (again typically) in two opposing ways. On the one hand, she holds the mirror up to a literal and appalling truth—as Hagar sees in it “a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the skin with an indelible pencil” (p. 79)—and on the other hand, she permits Hagar to “feel that if [she] were to walk carefully up to [her] room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise [she] would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair…” (p. 42) In these examples (and others I might have chosen), the power of the image is unleashed by a sense of rich imagery particularly—as if the image had been minted just for Hagar—and by a sense of universality.

Perhaps the most common feature of the Vollendungsroman is the life review in which narrative time is divided between past and present. The past—in which the characteristic matter of the Bildungsroman is recapitulated—typically approached and controlled through the operation of the elderly protagonist’s memory. The present “mirrors” the past in a number of complex ways, as the protagonist’s most basic identity themes are both reasserted and deconstructed in the final phase of life. Very often—as happens at the point of John’s death—the narrative of the past will break off sharply, leaving a gap between that period and the narrative present. At such junctures the possibilities of life appear to close down, the seal of failure is imprinted, and a desirable version of the self seems unattainable. The elderly protagonist will often repress this juncture at which vitality was lost; its eventual approach, however will be another kind of turning point a courageous breaking of the seal, releasing her into a new sense of possibility.

If the character’s old age is purely a framing device—if little or no attention is paid to development in the present or to the experience of being old—then the novel is not by Rooke’s definition a Vollendungsroman. There are also a number of contemporary novels that focus primarily on the present time of elderly protagonists. Thus, a Vollendungsroman like Muriel Spark’s Memento Mori or Paul Scott’s Staying On will contain elements of the life review without being structured by the process in the way that The Stone Angel clearly is. Generally however, a considerable portion of the narrative time is spent in the past. In this respect as in many others, The Stone Angel is a kind of template for the genre.

The life review is more than a structural device. It has philosophical implications that take us to the heart of the Vollendungsroman and the lives of elderly people. In 1963 one year prior to the appearance of The Stone Angel, Robert N. Butler published an essay called “The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged,” in which he posited “the universal occurrence in older people of an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one’s life.” He was arguing against the custom prevailing at the time, which was “to identify reminiscence in the aged with psychological dysfunction.” Butler suggests that “the life review Janus-like, involves death as well as looking back” and that “potentially [it] proceeds towards personality reorganization. Thus, the life review is not synonymous with, but includes reminiscence.” It includes also, as The Stone Angel does, a vital concern with the possibility of change.

Many of Butler’s insights and clinical observations are relevant to the case of Hagar. He remarks for instance, that “imagery of past events and symbols of death seem frequent in waking life as in the dreams suggesting that the life review is a highly visual process.” Inherently, then, the life review is a highly literary process as well; and Butler may be cited as supplying evidence for the interpenetration of life and art that helps to characterize the Vollendungsroman. The verisimilitude of Hagar’s “poetic” voice, as register of visually proliferating images—birds and eggs, for...
Butler’s essay is also concerned with the question of therapeutic value in the process of the life review. He rejects the position of certain psychotherapists that old people should not be encouraged to engage in life review, since they will only be devastated by their failures and their incapacity to repair them. He argues instead for the inherent value of “truth” and for the possibility of change at any point in the life cycle; he believes in the inevitability of the life review. Yet Butler acknowledges the risk of three kinds of people: “those who always tended to avoid the present and put great emphasis on the future... those who have consciously exercised the human capacity to injure others [and those who are] characterologically arrogant and prideful”. Although harsh and incomplete this might serve as a thumbnail sketch of Hagar Shipley. It sounds logical to agree with Constance Rooke’s final statement that life review has benefitted Hagar. She says, “Margaret Laurence, however would not be dissuaded any more than Hagar is herself. At risk in all these ways, Hagar profits nonetheless (and we profit) from her life review. She proceeds towards personality reorganisation.” (Essays in honour of Margaret Laurence. p.39)

2.4 SELF-ALIENATION OF THE ELDERLY AND THE STONE ANGEL

The portrayal of elderly characters as self-alienated is one of the major concerns for many modern writers. Rosalie Murphy Baun has examined Margaret Laurence’s fictional portrayal of women in A Jest of God, The Stone Angel, A Bird in the House and argues that the women’s patterns of behaviour in old age are simply variations of a neurotic pattern of self-alienation. What Marcia Westkott identifies as a “core dependent character” which is gender-neutral in our culture, begins in childhood, and can continue indefinitely in a parent-child-parent cycle.

Karon Horney a Third Force psychologist in her famous work Our Inner Conflicts focuses largely upon three basic patterns of neurotic behaviour which the “core dependent character” can take—the complaint or dependent, the aggressive or domineering, and the detached. All three forms are found in Laurence’s fiction. For example, Mrs.Cameron, Rachel’s mother in A Jest of God, is a good example of an elderly woman in whom complaint (“moving toward”) tendencies dominate. Such a person frequently controls others through his or her need of them; he may take the stance that “You must love me, protect me, forgive me, not desert me, because I am so weak and helpless.” Hagar Shipley, Marvin’s mother in The Stone Angel, offers a good example of the aggressive type (“moving against”), who denies his or her softer feelings, abhors helplessness, and seeks independence or mastery. Hagar is a superb example of two varieties of the type which Horney identifies as the perfectionist and the arrogant-vindictive and is Laurence’s supreme achievement in characterization. Mrs.Macleod, Ewen’s mother Vanessa’s grandmother in A Bird in the House, offers an excellent example of the detached person (“moving away from”). Such a person feels a strong need for superiority and usually looks at those around him with condescension. He or she frequently suppresses emotion and realizes his/her need for superiority in a world essentially of isolation.

Laurence’s portrayal of these three elderly women and their families offers a bleak view of human potential and, more especially, of the mother-child relationship. Although Horney indicates quite clearly that an individual can become neurotic because of the neurotic elements of his or her society and culture—for example, the contradictions between competition and brotherly love or between “conspicuous consumption” and “the reality of limited economic resources,” she also feels that appropriate parenting (that is parenting which successfully struggles with the neurotic culture) could make a difference. In Laurence’s novels, it is obvious that the neurotic
character in the early childhoods of Mrs. Cameron, Grandmother Connor, and Hagar Shipley has made it impossible for them to offer such parenting.

According to Horney, the greatest problem in character development occurs when a child has a “neurotic parent”, one for example whose insecurity and vulnerability to the ideals and stresses of a competitive society create within the family itself the very conditions of the society and culture. Most destructive of all is the pattern of treating a child as a narcissistic extension of the parent’s idealized self, a situation in which the child is made to feel, usually covertly, that his “right to existence lies solely in living up to the parents expectations, measuring up to their ambitions for him, enhancing their prestige, [or] giving them blind devotion.” (Self Analysis. p. 44)

By examining Hagar Shipley in the light of Karen Horney’s work on neurosis, an attempt is made to focus on the neurotic manner in which she interacts, actually conflicts, overtly or covertly with her son, Marvin with whom she is living. It is important, however, to make clear from the beginning that in no way does Horney suggest that conflict in and of itself, whether it is clashes between ourselves and others or within ourselves, is neurotic. Rather, conflict occurs within and between all of us, the nonneurotic and the neurotic; within the neurotic personality, however, the conflict is distinctive and self-destructive.

The symptoms of an impoverished personality appear with great clarity in the children of Laurence’s elderly heroines. However, the pretenses which Horney emphasizes are necessary for the neurotic personality—the pretense of love, the pretense of goodness, the pretense of interest and knowledge, the pretense of honesty and fairness, and the pretense of suffering—are most vivid in Laurence’s elderly women.

At the opening of The Stone Angel, Hagar Shipley is about ninety, an outrageous, difficult woman being cared for by her son Marvin and daughter-in-law, Doris. She has difficulty remembering what happens from one minute to the next and sometimes confuses events of the past with those of the present; she cries easily, screeches at her daughter-in-law with little or no cause, and is churlish or combative much of the time. In addition, she wets the bed and insists upon smoking in bed even though she frequently falls asleep with a burning cigarette; her arthritis makes her clumsy; and she suffers pain under her ribs, which is later diagnosed as cancer. At the time that she is experiencing these humiliations of old-age and inflicting them, without gratitude, upon her son and daughter-in-law she is “rampant with memory” that is, she relives, through memory, her entire life. In so doing, she recalls her great pride and her fear of emotion. She reviews the many times she has shown strength and control over others, the times she has refused to allow her emotions to show, and the times she has allowed “proper” appearances rather than genuineness or caring to rule her life. In her last days she realizes how pride has been her “wilderness” and fear her “demon”. She has lost the two men she loved most in life through her pride: never did she allow her husband, Bram, to see the love and sexual attraction she felt for him, thereby contributing to his alcholism and death; never did she allow her son John to live his own life until her interference actually led to his death. Hagar realizes in her last hours that she has never really lived, never simply rejoiced. Her life has been all pride and pretense, including many of the pretenses discussed by Horney.

Hagar’s son Marvin, with his wife, has devoted the last seventeen years of his life caring for his elderly mother. He has served her in every way he could, cringing from the bickering and recriminations between her and his wife, feeling guilty about the great burden that his wife has to bear from both the physical needs and unkind attitude of his mother. At one point, as he realizes that his wife simply cannot continue to lift his mother when she falls, he is able for a short time to consider placing his mother in a home for the aged, but his “Hopeful desperation” that she will like the place succumbs quickly to his mother’s refusal. As a child, Marvin had also tried to serve his mother well, doing his chores ably and hanging around her, fruitlessly hoping for
words of praise or affection. But he has never been important to his mother. Only in her last hours, when Hagar comes to realize something of the emotional desert her life has been, does she see Marvin as a loving, caring, responsible child begging for a blessing from a parent who has always ignored him. With this insight, Hagar blesses him, saying, “you have been good to me, always” (p. 304) and she deliberately and caringly lies to him by adding that he has been “a better son than John”, her favourite son. Thus, Hagar lifts from Marvin his sense of weakness and worthlessness, and he believes her. Who would tell a lie on her deathbed? A son whose impoverished personality with its neurotic dependency has struggled responsibly throughout a lifetime of hard work and little joy, Marvin is one of the luckier children in Laurence: he has had limited joy with his wife, Doris, and their children, Tina and Steven, and he receives his mother’s blessing and release when she is ninety and he is in his sixties.

Examining Karen Horney’s three basic patterns of neurotic behaviour with reference to the parent-child relationships created by Laurence in three of her works of fiction, is especially appropriate because of the very nature of neurotic trends. As Horney points out, the neurotic is highly dependent upon other people, whatever form his neurosis may have assumed. He depends upon people for moving toward, moving against, or moving away from. One could almost say that the parent-child relationship offers a particularly revealing (if unfortunate) laboratory for examining the variations of neurotic behaviour since the parent-child relationship, by definition, involves two people bound together by the physical and emotional needs of the younger. Laurence’s fiction is also especially appropriate for examining such neurotic patterns because Laurence, in the words of John Moss, “celebrates life while lamenting the limitations placed upon it by personality.” (The Canadian Novel) Laurence’s fiction indicates quite clearly that the neurotic bonds established in childhood remain throughout life, even in a case like Marvin, who left home at seventeen, when Hagar was in her early forties, and lived away from her for thirty years. However, The Stone Angel also suggests that when the mother-figure has a strong personality like that of Hagar Shipley, the child’s personality appears even more impoverished than that of the parent; and the child is certainly a less interesting fictional character than the parent. Hagar’s discovery at the end that life’s purpose is to rejoice—is ultimately Horney’s definition of the goal of therapy—to create “wholeheartedness: to be without pretense, to be emotionally sincere, to be able to put the whole of oneself into one’s feelings, one’s work, one’s beliefs”. (Our Inner Conflicts p.242) But since it is the neurotic character—especially the grand dame of them all, Hagar—who holds the attention of readers, we cannot help being grateful for such neuroses, at least in fiction if not in life.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has taken up the discussion of three different yet interconnected aspects of The Stone Angel. The first part has studied in detail the complex but memorable personality of the protagonist Hagar Shipley. While highlighting the peculiar and distinguishing qualities of Hagar’s character an effort has been made to establish how her ancestry and upbringing plays a vital role in making her extremely proud and a staunch believer in keeping up appearances. This belief has ruined her chances of enjoying freedom and joy within the framework of familial relationships even. Growth and self-knowledge are the two important aims of all major characters in Laurence’s fiction. Hagar also, during her last days in the hospital, is blessed with the knowledge of her limitations and the strengths of others with whom she has interacted. She musters up the courage to view them as they are and admits that her own temperament has been her undoing.

Since Hagar Shipley is an old woman of ninety and she is the protagonist of the novel, the novel is discussed as a typical example of Vollendungsroma – a novel of
‘completion’ or ‘winding up’. Another related aspect of the novel – the theme of self-alienation of the elderly has also been taken up for discussion.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Irascible: susceptible to ire or anger, irritable.
Incontinent: not restraining natural discharges or evacuations.
Restitution: restoration
Amelioration: to make better
Protypical: an original type or model
Truncated: short, maimed
Recapitulate: to go through the stages of one’s life history
Template: a mould shaped to the required outline from which workmen execute moulding.
Proliferating: to grow by multiplication of parts.
Vindicated: justified
Therapeutic: healing, curative

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Establish how pride has been the undoing of Hagar Shipley.
2. *The Stone Angel* is Hagar Shipley’s progress towards inner freedom. Discuss.
3. What are the distinguishing features of Vollendingsroman? Enumerate them with special reference to *The Stone Angel*.

2.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


Laurence, Margaret. “Gadgetry or Growing? Form and Voice in the Novel,” Lecture at the University of Toronto, Fall, 1969.


