UNIT 3 THE STONE ANGEL: A NOVEL OF AWAKENING

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is prepared with the purpose of discussing The Stone Angel as a novel of awakening and to analyse the novel with a view to establishing a connection between religious concepts and the issues related to female identity.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, Carol Christ describes a common pattern in women’s spiritual quests, which takes a distinctive form in the work of women writers. The first stage in the spiritual quest process is what Christ calls an “experience of nothingness,” the second stage, is awakening. Awakening often occurs through the third stage, which she terms as “mystical identification”, and frequently takes place in a natural setting. The last stage in the process Christ terms as “new naming of self and reality”. Tracing this pattern in Margaret Laurence’s The Stone Angel places Hagar Shipley’s story in a strong tradition of writing by women: the novel of awakening. Here readers attempt to understand the female protagonists as they attempt to understand themselves.

3.2 THE STONE ANGEL: A NOVEL OF AWAKENING

The Stone Angel explores several ideas common to the novel of awakening: the survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality, and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present. Laurence’s achievement is that she makes her protagonist’s awakening contingent upon her ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother, and that the awakening in The Stone Angel evolves in the consciousness of a ninety-year-old woman.

The awakening process that Christ describes begins in an experience of nothingness. According to Christ, women experience nothingness in their own lives, especially in their relationship with men. That is certainly true of Laurence’s protagonist Hagar Currie Shipley. Early in The Stone Angel, Hagar cries, “Oh, my lost men. No, I will not think of that.” (p.6) But Hagar does not have as much control over her thoughts as she would like. She tries to come to terms with her failed relationships with the men in her life: her father, her two brothers, her husband, and her two sons.
Christ says that women also experience nothingness in the values that have shaped their lives. Again that is true in Hagar's case. Because her mother dies when Hagar is born, Hagar's life is shaped and dominated by the patriarchal and materialistic values that she inherits from her stern Scottish father Jason Currie. Laurence has admitted that *The Stone Angel* was an attempt to understand her grandparent's generation. Hagar's father represents the best and worst of that generation: an unbounding authoritarian, he is afraid to show love, easily angered, bigoted, ambitious, hard-working, dutiful, proud, and strong. From him, Hagar inherits all those attributes, along with the Scottish clan motto that she lives by all her life: "Gainsay who Dare." (p. 15) From him she also inherits her hatred of even the appearance of weakness. One of her earliest memories is of being beaten by her father and her reaction to the punishment: "I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged." (p. 9) She also recalls her father's response: "You take after me.... You've got backbone." (p. 10) Hagar also inherits her father's brains. Once she overhears her father talking about her: "Smart as a whip, she is, that one." (p. 14) Hagar does not need to hear the end of the sentence, and neither do her brothers.

In her first mention of her brothers, Hagar says, "My brothers took after our mother." (p. 7) She describes them as "graceful uninspired boys." (p. 7) Implicit here is the damaging association between women and weakness that Hagar makes throughout most of her life. The same association is implicit in her opening description of the stone angel which guards her mother's grave: "in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one."(p. 3) It is this association that damages her relationship with her brothers. When her brother Dan is dying of pneumonia, Matt, her other brother, tries to talk the teenaged Hagar into wearing their mother's shawl to comfort Dan. Hagar refuses. "But all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much a part of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her—was beyond me." (p. 25) Hagar wants to do what Matt asks but, as she puts it, she is "unable to bend enough." When she rejects her mother's weakness, she becomes like her stone image. Hagar loses the fullness of her potential self when she cuts herself off from others.

It is this inability to bend that destroys her relationship with her husband, Bram Shipley. Hagar is attached to Bram because of what he represents to her: rebellion against her father's authority and middle class values, and a response to the natural world. It is significant that the first time Hagar sees Bram at a dance she thinks he looks like a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face she also "revealed in his fingernails with crescents of ingrown earth that never met a file."(p. 45) She is shocked when during their first dance, he presses his groin against her, yet she accepts his request for another dance. It is clear that Hagar is attracted to Bram's earthy sexuality, but it is also clear that the values she inherits from her father and her training in the cult of true womanhood will not allow her to acknowledge that attraction. Her Currie inheritance and finishing-school training cause her to denigrate the very qualities in Bram that she is drawn to. When her father refuses to have anything to do with her marriage to Bram, or with her, Hagar is at first certain that he "would soften and, yield, when he saw how Brampton Shipley prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar." (p. 50) Her ideas about love, like her ideas about everything else, are shaped by her alienating background. If she imagined Bram as a rugged Indian when they first met, in the next instant she "imagined him rigged out in a suit of grey, soft as a dove's breast-feathers." (p. 45) Her romantic conceptions about love prevent her from recognizing her true feelings for her husband: "He had a banner over me for many years. I never thought it love, though, after we wed. Love, I fancied, must consist of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets, not like the things he did sprawled on the high white bedstead that rattled like a train." (p. 80) Hagar's attempts to tame Bram are futile and destructive. Their battle of wills hurts him, her, and their relationship. She is more successful at taming her own response to her husband. "It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and
I made certain that the trembling was all inner I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead." (p. 81)

To show response would be to accept being a woman. Denying her womanliness also means denying her sexuality. Her success at controlling herself is just as destructive as her attempts to control Bram. When she feels tenderness for her husband, as she does when he loses a prized horse, she refuses to express it, seeing such feelings as weak and womanly. The same intolerance of weakness, prevents her from telling Bram of her fears when she finds that she is pregnant. At several points in their relationship, Hagar pulls away when they have chances to pull together. When Bram takes her to the hospital to deliver their son, for example, instead of sharing Bram’s excitement, Hagar feels ashamed to be seen with him.

It is concern about what others think, her pride, that causes Hagar to leave Bram, just as defiance of what others think, and her pride, caused her to leave her father and marry Bram. When she leaves him to support herself and her youngest son, John, by becoming a housekeeper for a rich man on the coast, she proves her strength, her independence and her ability to survive. But leaving Bram levies a heavy emotional toll. Hagar’s memories of him suggest that not only did she miss him in her bed, but she also missed his recognition and respect of her. Looking back, she thinks “he was the only person close to me who ever thought of me by my name, not daughter, nor sister, nor mother, not even wife, but Hagar, always.” (p. 80) That Bram is the only one who calls her by her name is important. It gives her a sense of self which her lack of a relationship with her mother has denied.

Hagar’s unexpressed, unacknowledged love for Bram affects her relationship with her youngest son, John. Despite hints in her narrative that John is very much like his father, Hagar insists on seeing him as a Currie through and through. She even gives him one of her prized possessions, her Currie clan pin. He asserts his allegiance to Bram by trading it for a knife. John’s similarity to Bram is clearest in his relationship with Arlene Simmons. He assumes that Arlene is attracted to him for the same reason that Hagar is initially attracted to Bram, because she is not supposed to be. They first get together at a dance, like Bram and Hagar did. John gets drunk, like his father, who drank himself to death, and Arlene brings him home. When Johns learns that Arlene took care of him, he grins, and Hagar describes it as “the same distorted mouth as I’d seen before on someone else.” (p. 199) When Arlene defends John by denying that he is like Bram, Hagar gets angry at the implied criticism of her dead husband. It is clear, except to Hagar, that her preference for the younger son is based on his resemblance to his father.

Just as John resembles the young Bram, Arlene is like the young Hagar. Remembering Arlene taking care of the drunken John, Hagar observes, “She was a very practical girl in some ways.” (p. 198) When Arlene’s parents lose their money during the Depression she is proud of her own self-sufficiency when she gets a job. But unlike Hagar, Arlene is able to express her feelings for the man she loves. When Hagar overhears them making love, it is clear to her that Arlene is enjoying herself, and that is when Hagar takes steps to stop them from marrying. Hagar’s reaction to John’s marriage is similar to her father’s reaction to hers. She arranges with Arlene’s parents to send Arlene away. When Johns learns of Arlene’s departure he gets drunk, drives with Arlene on the railway bridge and kills them both in a self-destructive game with a freight train. It is not until Hagar goes through her process of awakening that she is able to come to terms with her guilt over her part in John and Arlene’s death.

Whereas Hagar was too protective of John, she almost ignores her elder son, Marvin. While she insists that the wild John is a Currie through and through, it is the hard-working Marvin who seems most like Hagar’s father. As John tells her, “You always bet on the wrong horse... Marvin was your boy, but you never saw that.” (p. 237) It is clear from Hagar’s memories that Marvin would have done anything to win her approval. “He was a serious and plodding little boy, and seemed to take to chores
The Stone Angel

naturally. But when he'd finished them, he'd hang around the kitchen waiting for approval or at least acknowledgement." (p. 112) "But he never wins them from Hagar. The same pattern emerges when he leaves to join the war. Hagar feels a pang of tenderness: "I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him, against all reason and reality, not to go. But I did not want to embarrass both of us, nor have him think I'd taken leave of my senses." (p. 129) Once again, Hagar's pride comes between her and those she loves. As she says, "the moment eluded us both." (p. 130) The relationship between Hagar and Marvin doesn't improve when he and his wife, Doris, move in with Hagar to take care of her. Living with an aging and irascible Hagar makes life difficult for all of them, as Hagar herself realizes: "I have lived with Marvin and Doris—or they have lived in my house, whichever way one cares to phrase it—for seventeen years. Seventeen—it weighs like centuries. How have I borne it? How have they?" (p. 37) When Hagar's fall and memory lapses convince them that they can no longer care for her, they investigate the possibility of putting her in Silverthreads, a nursing home. Hagar's pride and self-reliance will not permit this and an attempt to stop it leads to her awakening.

As Hagar thinks about her "lost men," it becomes clear that her relationships with them are marked by failure; by her failure to understand those she loves, and by her failure to express her feelings so that they could understand her. Clearly, Hagar experiences the "nothingness" in her relationships with the men in her life that Christ sees in women's novels of awakening, but even more damaging is the nothingness she experiences in her relationships with women, symbolized by the stone angel. The Stone Angel opens with a scene that connects the imagery associated with the mother figure and the imagery associated with the natural world. The novel begins with a description of the stone angel which dominates the small prairie town of Manawaka, and the whole novel: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty." (p. 3)

The stone angel is an emblem of the guilt which Hagar feels for the fact that her birth caused her mother's death, for the weakness that she associates with her mother, and for the power she associates with her father. The mother herself is an emblem and a victim of the colonial system. Yet this image is all Hagar has had for her desire for the mother, her need to be protected, and her pain at her mother's suffering characterize her childhood. Hagar stares at the stone angel's blind eyes, but never sees herself reflected there. Traditional accounts of psychological development argue that the child acquires a sense of self from the nurturing gaze of its mother-figure, grows away from her into an independent being, and goes on to master the world outside, symbolized by the father. The mother figure represents the first external mirror, eventually internalized, into which the girl-child looks to discover her identity. The Stone Angel provides a striking version of the absence of a mirroring bond and it's painful effects on the heroine. Hagar's life story is the narrative of a subject's painful inability to belong to a place in any secure way, to belong to a larger community until she can come to terms with her image of the mother and with her own role as a mother.

Hagar seems to suffer from what Adrienne Rich calls matrophobia: "the fear not of one's mother or motherhood but of becoming one's mother... the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted." (Of Women Born, p. 235) Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull towards her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely. Hagar exhibits the dread that Rich mentions when she refuses to wear her mother's shawl to comfort her dying brother. She also exhibits the debilitating effects of matrophobia that Rich describes in the following terms: "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become..."
individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother’s and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery.” (Of Women Born, p. 236)

Clearly, the stone angel represents the mother as martyr and Hagar performs the kind of radical surgery which Rich fears. She fits Rich’s description of the motherless woman: “the motherless woman may also react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may feel uneasy with equals, particularly women.” This is certainly true of Hagar, whose fear of the female and the inability to accept her own womanhood lead to decidedly unflattering images of women in the first half of the novel. Doris is an “unwilling hen,” (p. 36) Bram’s daughters are like “lumps of unrendered fat”, (p. 56) the old women at Silverthreads are “ewe,” (p. 98) Although Hagar needs the sense of safety which an acknowledged identification with her mother and other women might confer, the death of her mother and her fear of becoming her, bars her from this feeling of unity and dooms her to a sense of fragmentation, which is reflected in her opening description of the angel and its surroundings. In her opening description of the Manawaka cemetery, Laurence sets up several oppositions that will divide Hagar from herself and from those she loves, especially Bram. The clearest opposition is between the foreign peony and the native cowslip. Hagar remembers “the funeral-parlour perfume of the planted peonies, dark crimson and wallpaper pink, the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves.” (p. 4)

This recollection contrasts sharply with her memories of the cowslips.

“They were tough-rooted, these wild and gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at the cemetery’s edge torn out by loving relatives to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized, for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree.” (p. 5)

Hagar’s disdain for the imported peonies and her respect for the native cowslips suggest her ambivalence about the domestication of the prairie which Kolodny discusses in The Land Before Her. This passage could be read as a critique of the pioneer experience, an emblem of one woman’s struggle with the conflicting values of domesticity and respect for the natural environment. Several contrasts are suggested in the opening scenes of the novel: death-life, artificial-natural, conscious-unconscious, civilization-nature, repression-passion, present-past, order-disorder, Currie-Shipley. Since all Hagar ever knew was the separation and fragmentation suggested by these binary oppositions, she is condemned to repeat them in all of her relationships. The lack of a bond between mother and daughter results in a painful psychological bondage from which Hagar cannot free herself until her awakening in the western Canadian landscape.

According to Christ, as a result of experiencing nothingness, the female protagonists “question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of a deeper source of power and value.” (Diving Deep and Surfacing, p. 13) Hagar’s memories can be seen as an attempt to understand her life, and they help prepare her for the transformation she undergoes at Shadow Point. Like her marriage to Bram, Hagar’s trip to the abandoned cannery on the edge of the ocean represents her rebellion against authority, against Doris and Marvin and their decision to place her in the Silverthreads nursing home. As Hagar plots her escape to Shadow Point, her defiance is clear: “They are greatly mistaken if they think I will bend meekly and never raise a finger. I have taken matters into my own hands before, and can again, if need be.” (p. 139)

Hagar’s trip to Shadow Point is also like her marriage to Bram in that it represents her repressed response to the natural world. At Shadow Point, Hagar gets in touch with external nature and with her own. She goes there because she is drawn to its quiet
beauty: “I like this green blue-ceilinged place, warm and cool with sun and shade where I am not fussed at. Perhaps I have come here not to hide but to seek.” (p. 192-93) What Hagar finds at Shadow Point is her own repressed response to the natural world as opposed to the domestic values that she has used to keep herself in check for so many years. This change is signaled when she replaces her old lady hat with the dead June bugs she finds in the abandoned cannery: “I take off my hat it’s hardly suitable for here, anyway, a prim domestic hat sprouting cultivated flowers. Then with considerable care I arrange the Jade and copper pieces in my hair.” (p. 216) Pleased with the effect, Hagar imagines herself “queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs.” (p. 216) Hagar’s coronation is in keeping with her comparison of herself to Keats’ Meg Merrilies.

Old Meg she was a gypsy,  
And lived upon the moors;  
Her bed it was the brown heath turf,  
And her house was out of doors. (p. 151)

Hagar’s house at the cannery, like Meg’s is essentially “out of doors”. Under these conditions, Hagar’s usual concern with protective boundaries is suspended. Like the house, Hagar is open to the natural world, and her openness is signified by her identification with Meg. According to Helen Buss, Meg also represents Hagar’s openness to a new view of womanhood: “coming to terms with feminine values is largely accomplished for her through her identification of her womanhood with the figure of Meg Merrilies.” Buss points out that Meg represents the “woman outside the civilized order that Hagar needs to touch in herself.” Meg is also “brave as Margaret Queen” and “Tall as Amazon” thus representing a womanly strength based on a female tradition rather than a denial of femininity. According to Buss, “Hagar’s chart of brave old Meg gives her a vision of female strength that she has previously lacked.” (Mother and Daughter Relationships...p. 17)

Christ argues that Hagar’s awakening takes place in a natural setting and it is presaged by a storm. Since the ocean is the “matrix of creation” in literature, it often represents a desire to return to that “pool of darkness” that is associated with women. The ocean represents surrender, release but also rebirth, a cleansing baptismal plunge. This water imagery represents a condition absolutely opposed to the stony paralysis of the angel. While listening to the smoothing sounds of the sea, Hagar does plunge into the depths of her memories with the help of Murray Ferney Lees, an agent for Dependable Life Assurance. Christ notes that in women’s spiritual quest literature, the awakening often resembles a conversion experience. There are certainly religious overtones to the scenes between Hagar and Lees. They share a jug of wine and tell each other their confessions. Religion figures prominently in Lees’s story, and he tells it in a language reminiscent of an itinerant preacher which is appropriate since he comes from a long line of circuit riders. The confession/sermon which he delivers to Hagar seems tailor-made for her. As Constance Rooke points out, Lees’s story is essentially Hagar’s “where the chief villains are a concern for appearances and denial of sexuality, and where the catastrophe involves the loss of a son.” (A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel”, p. 31)

Laurence emphasizes the importance of the night that Hagar and Lees spend together in the abandoned cannery by making it the nexus of her dual plots. As she listens to Mr. Lees’s tragedy in the present, her memories take her to John’s death in the past. Since Hagar was so traumatized by seeing all that she loved destroyed, it is no wonder that she is compelled to repeat it. Lees’s confession moves her to make her own, but it is not until he responds to it that she realizes that for the first time in her life, she had spoken her feelings out loud. Her reaction is uncharacteristic, “I am not sorry I have talked to him, not sorry at all, and that’s remarkable.” (p. 253) They discuss their anger about their senseless losses and then Hagar describes the effect of their revelations: “We sit close together for warmth, both of us, leaning against the boxes. And then we slip into sleep.” (p. 246) When Hagar awakes she feels the effects of spending two nights in the open and Lees’s cheap wine. She is sick and confused. In
her confusion she mistakes Lees for her lost son, and tells him that she won't come between John and Arlene. Lees pretends to be John and forgives her. This allows Hagar to forgive herself. At Shadow Point, Hagar comes to terms with the image of the mother on two levels: the image of Meg Merrilies supplants the image of woman as victim which Hagar has carried with her since the death of her mother, and her confession to Lees allows her to confront her own failure as a mother. Her journey to Shadow Point is also a journey into that part of her past, her failure as a mother, that she has been trying to avoid remembering and finally, a journey into acceptance. Her experiences at Shadow Point force Hagar to revise her notion of what being a woman means.

It is through Lees that Hagar achieves the "mystical identification" that Christ cites as a characteristic of women's novels of awakening. The night she spends with him prepares her for what Christ terms "a new naming of self and reality that articulates the new orientation to self and world achieved through the awakening." (Diving Deep and Surfacing, p. 22) While Hagar does not become a sweet old lady overnight, the effects of her experience with Lees are almost immediately apparent. Her first reaction is anger when she finds that Lees has betrayed her hiding place to Marvin and Doris. When Doris tells her that Lees has saved her life, Hagar is annoyed and amused, "This ridiculous statement makes me laugh, but then, looking into this strange man's eyes, an additional memory returns, something more of what he spoke to me last evening, and I to him, and the statement no longer seems so ridiculous. Impulsively, hardly knowing what I am doing, I reach and touch his wrist." (p. 253)

Hagar, who always flinches from human contact, touches him because he has touched her. He has saved her life.

Signs of Hagar's awakening are numerous in the last weeks of her life. While symbols of frozen womanhood, especially the stone angel, dominate the early chapters of the novel, the last two chapters feature images of women, both patients and nurses, as nurturer. As Buss points out, "we may measure Hagar's growth in her last days by her changing attitudes towards women, her increasing ability to receive mothering love and offer love in return Hagar begins a process whereby she allows other women to touch her life." (Mother and Daughter Relationships, p. 12) One of the most significant signs of her awakening is that Hagar, who has never been able to form attachments with women, becomes part of the women's community in the hospital where she spends her last days. Initially, she complains to Marvin about the noise and lack of privacy in the women's ward, but when he arranges for her to be moved to a semi-private room, she realizes that she will miss the other women, and the dialogues that they carry on in their dreams. The night cries in the women's hospital ward express their shared psychic field. Their mental barriers are permeable and their sleeping conversation incorporates all of the women's psychic lives.

Another sign of her awakening is Hagar's relationship with two young women—Sandra Wong, the teenager who shares her new room, and Doris's daughter, Tina. Hagar, who cannot think of anything that she has done to help someone else, gets out of her own bed, though she is in great pain, to get a bedpan for her young roommate. This scene is small, but important, for Hagar is able to define herself in a new way so that being a woman does not mean becoming her mother, retaining all the old connections with weakness, assuming automatically the outdated passive roles. Hagar's changing view of womanhood is reflected in her identification with her granddaughter. In Buss's view, Hagar's "gentle feelings towards Tina signal a new stage in her life, one that is to bring her closer to the mother and the values represented by that figure." Constance Rooke argues that Hagar's reconciliation with the image of the mother signifies a connection between four generations of women. According to Adrienne Rich, "Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter from women to women across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness." (Of Women Born, p. 246) Hagar comes to realize that she has been wandering in the wilderness, and her gift of the rings is her attempt to pass on the love, confirmation, and example which she lacked.
The gesture involves not destruction of the “mother” but rather a confrontation with and an incorporation of the matriarchal power to nurture.

The most significant sign of Hagar’s growth in the novel comes in its most famous passage, when she faces some difficult truths about herself. “Every good joy I might have held, in my man or child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart’s truth? Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear.” (p. 292)

Throughout the novel Hagar is, in effect, reading her own life; in this passage she realizes that she is the author. Although this passage has received a lot of discussion from Laurence scholars, no one except Christ has noticed Hagar’s emphasis on her sense of loss as a woman and a mother and her recognition that this loss is tied to her ability to respond to her natural surroundings and caused by the pride and fear of feminine weakness which she inherited from her father. In speaking “the heart’s truth”, Hagar achieves both a reconciliation with the feminine and a new sense of her own strength as a woman. By facing the stone angel which she has become, Hagar gets in touch with her life giving forces. Hagar looks Medusa’s Stone Angel in the eye. Instead of being turned to stone, she is released into the world of feeling away from the frozen rage which Medusa represents. Facing the truth about herself allows her to speak it. When Marvin ask her how she is, she is set to lie, but instead she tells him, “I am frightened Marvin I am so frightened.” (p. 303) Even more difficult is the lie she tells him that he has been a better son to her than John. Hagar considers her final mothering of Marvin a victory and Buss explains why she is right:

When we consider the distance she has had to reach out to find the mother and the scant hand-holds her society offered her in her search we may be inclined to agree with her assessment of victory, and conclude that Laurence’s achievement has not been in her portrayal of isolation but in her portrayal of the feminine search for relatedness despite all the forces of isolation. (Mother and Daughter Relationships...p.30)

When she leaves her room, Hagar overhears Marvin discussing her. It is one of the most moving passages in the novel: “She’s a holy terror,” (p.304) he says. Hagar is a holy terror to the end. In the last scene of the novel, she characteristically refuses to let the nurse help her drink a glass of water and insists on holding it in her own hands, just as she had held her life in her own hands. The Stone Angel ends with Hagar triumphantly drinking the water and then the words “And then”. (p.308) As W.H. New points out, there are several ways to read this ending. In a novel shaped by Hagar’s memory, “And then” could mean “at that time in the past,” a final expression of the past imposing itself on the present. Or “And then” could mean “on the other hand” an expression of an alternative possibility. But I prefer to read “And then” as “next” an expression of continuity. It seems fitting that a novel that begins with death, that has at its center an awakening that places it in a long tradition of writing by women, and that attempts to explore the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, should end countering finality with regeneration. That Hagar’s recognition of herself as a woman coincides with her own death is not only the tragedy of restricted choices. It is also her triumphant assumption of the female and of the painful but liberating comprehension of it.

3.3 THE STONE ANGEL: THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE FEMININE IDENTITY ISSUE

The major contention of many Liberationists including Mary Days, the author of Beyond God the Father, is that a major factor in preventing women from achieving a genuine sense of identity has been the “dominant male” philosophy embedded in
Judaeo-Christian Theology. Accordingly women are urged to expose the sexual politics inherent in the Bible and to construct a new “theology” based upon matriarchal cults and upon the real experiences articulated by contemporary liberated women. Evelyn J. Hinz has insightfully explored the connection between religious issues and female identity in The Stone Angel. While doing so she has also questioned many of the premises and conclusions of the feminists.

The Stone Angel with its flash back technique is designed to provide the causes of Hager’s present loneliness, or gender alienation, and above all her fear of death. Though played out on sociological, psychological, and histo/cultural levels, all of the protagonist’s problems are shown to stem from the religious climate in which she has been raised. Thus Laurence, in a seemingly feminist fashion, dramatizes the extent to which religious ideology permeates even secular aspects of human existence.

Hagar could be described as the damaged product of the Judaeo-Christian education that emphasizes mental/male talents. This tradition is made clear through the name – specifically the initials – of her prime mentor, her father, Jason Currie. Similarly, though Hagar’s relationship with her father could be studied as a modern version of the Electra Complex, her sense that her husband has committed a sacrilege when he urinates on the front steps of her father’s store suggests the religious implications of the episode and so prevents any simple Freudian interpretation of her response.

Or again, if what has prevented Hagar’s acceptance of her own femininity has something to do with the biological fact that her mother died in giving her birth and with the culturally upheld ideal of slim, virginal female, these too are shown to have their roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Her religious role models are her mother’s monument, an “angel of pure white marble”, and the sisterly Madonna of Michelangelo’s Pieta – the latter being iconographically evoked when Hagar refuses to hold her dying brother and to drape him and herself in their mother’s shawl.

Finally, if Hagar’s sexual prudery and inability to articulate her delight in carnal love are symptomatic of the Victorian ethos of her time, Laurence also traces the problem to the spiritual orientation of Christianity. Thus, it is in the context of her recollection of the line “His banner over me was love” (p. 80) that Hagar in retrospect acknowledges the way in which she – like the commentators who allegorized the erotic Song of Solomon – refused to let her husband sense her sexual response.

Yet to see The Stone Angel purely as a Dalyesque critique would be to miss Laurence’s equal concern with the implications of the decline of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. If Jason Curie’s initials suggest the Saviour, for example, his first name also allies him with the questor for the golden fleece. His donations to the church proceed from no religious piety but rather from a desire to broadcast his financial superiority. For him, the importance of the angel tombstone is that it had been bought “at terrible expense” and that of all the angels in the cemetery “has the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest.” (p. 3) Therefore, if like his classical namesake he sacrifices the female for his own interest, he also represents the materialization of spiritual values.

Similarly, far from it being her father’s use of religious authority to sanction his notions of dominance, it is his lack of a sense of hierarchy that bothers Hagar. Recalling how in church the congregation sang the psalm “unto the hills around do I lift up/My longing eyes” to “God the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made,” (p. 16) Hagar continues: “Auntie Doll was always telling us that father was a God-fearing man. I never for a moment believed it, of course. I couldn’t imagine Father fearing anyone, God included, especially when he didn’t even owe his existence to the Almighty. God might have created heaven and earth and the majority of people, but father was a self-made man, as he himself had told us often enough.” (p. 17)

Conversely, Hagar’s real tragedy lies in her “feminist” confusion of spiritual and secular authority figures. Equating God and her father, she stops going to church
because of the way she feels her husband has disgraced her in the father's eyes: "I preferred possible damnation in some comfortably distant future, to any ordeal then of peeking or pitying eyes. But now when time has folded in like a paper fan, I wonder if I shouldn't have kept on going. What if it matters to Him after all, what happens to us." (p. 90)

Another factor to call into question regarding the feminist position is that what bothers Hagar about Christianity is not its "masculinity" as much as its "effeminacy." Here Laurence seems to be suggesting that the new Testament constitutes a decline from the Old. Hagar's husband is also a Christ figure—like Jesus, he was "born in a barn" and although his "feminine" association with the earth strikes a sympathetic cord in Hagar, it is also his lack of masculine assertiveness that is responsible for the failure in their relationship. This recognition comes to him in his last delirious moments when he muses: "That Hagar—I should have licked the living daylights out of her, may be, and she'd have seen I could. What d'you think? Think I should of?" (p. 173) Hagar's response in turn is "I could not speak for the salt that filled my throat and for anger" (p. 173) -not anger at her husband for such a male chauvinist statement, but anger over the realization of how different things might have been if Bram had been a stronger mate.

Furthering her critique of the effeminacy of the New Testament and its degeneracy, moreover, is Laurence's characterization of the surrogate God figure, the minister, who, Hagar's very "religious" (p. 38) daughter-in-law feels will bring the old woman "comfort" in her last days. Far from evidencing any "Trojan" qualities, the Reverenced speaks for prayer and comfort, all in a breath, as though God were a kind of feather bed or spring filled mattresses. Not only is modern Christianity too soft, finally, it is also essentially too materialistic:

Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelation says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of pearl and topaz, like a gigantic chunk of costume jewellery. Saint John of Patmos can keep his sequined heaven, or share it with Mr. Troy, for all I care, and spend eternity in fingering the gems and telling each other gleefully they are worth a fortune. (p. 120)

Yet what is ultimately most problematic about the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as Laurence sees it, is its egocentricity and the concept of individual uniqueness. To emphasize this point, at the moment of Hagar's greatest sense of loneliness, Laurence has her protagonist ponder the twin issues of identity and the fear of death: "Hard to imagine a world and me not in it. Will everything stop when I do? Stupid old baggage, who do you think you are? Hagar. There's no one like me in this world." (p. 250)

Accordingly, one of Laurence's major strategies in The Stone Angel is to evoke biblical prototypes for Hagar, whereby she disproves her protagonist's claims to uniqueness at the same time that she demonstrates that the Bible is merely the Judaeo-Christian rendition—or "signature—of mythic or eternally recurring experiences. Just as the biblical Hagar was the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, taken by him because his first wife, Sarah was childless, so Laurence's Hagar, who likens herself to "Pharaoh's daughter", is the second wife of Bram," whose first wife, Clara, had provided him with no male heirs. Just as a key episode in the Abraham story is Jehovah's command that he sacrifice his son, so Hagar is subjected to a test of faith when she watches Bram one day "cut a slab of waxen honey and hold it out" to their son, who opens his mouth, afraid to do otherwise, and stands stock still and white, while the honeyed butcher knife rams in ... "offering sweetness on a steel that in another season slit pigs' carcasses." (p. 125)

In turn, with a view to denying chronology – which is the historical equivalent of separateness – Laurence also finds a precedent for Hagar in the succeeding biblical
Just as Isaac’s wife, Rebecca, helped her son, Jacob, to cheat his brother out of his birthright, so Hagar wants her second son, John to be the true heir of her father’s line. Similarly, to demonstrate the universal and therefore non-sex-differentiated nature of archetypal experience, Laurence does not limit Hagar’s prototypes to women. Bereft of everything, faced with the seemingly unjust ways of God, constipated Hagar is like “Job in reverse”.

Most important of all, however, are the variations that Laurence plays on the story of Jacob and the angel, by which Hagar becomes identified not only with another masculine type but also with the spirit of Jehovah, so Hagar must realize that her identity crisis stems not from secular issues but from religious ones – from “the lack of a proper foundation garment” in a metaphorical sense. On the other hand, she must come to realize that she is the antagonistic force in her relationship with her son John. As he tries to straighten the toppled angel in the graveyard, she compares him to Jacob “wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no.” (p. 179) Rather it is her other son, Marvin, who plays this role, gripping her hand with all his strength, and bargaining, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And I see that I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.” (p. 304)

In contrast to feminists who argue that the Bible has absolutely nothing to say to women, 

*The Stone Angel* argues that it is only the Judaeo-Christian “signature” that is problematic. Nor would Laurence appear to agree with those who argue categorically that what women need is a religion which reverses the Judaeo-Christian alignment of pride and self-assertion with sin and conversely of self-sacrifice with virtue. To the exact contrary, when Hagar explicitely connects her situation with that of her biblical prototype, it is precisely in terms of hubris and to the extent to which she has internalized the egocentric value system of a monotheistic deity: “Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched.” (p. 292)

“Nothing can take away those years,” Hagar concludes, inquiring into the guilt she feels for the love she has withheld, but with Laurence pointing to what Hagar has missed most of all is her essentially Protestant upbringing: namely, rituals of atonement and exorcism. To provide these is Laurence’s purpose in having Hagar escape to an old fishy cannery where she encounters a seedy “life assurance” salesman just as Laurence herein recovers the pagan or Dionysian figure of the redeemer and his cults which lie beyond or have degenerated into the more Apollonian Christian signature. Significantly, the episode takes the form of a descent to “Shadow Point”, which would seem to imply both that it is not consciousness-raising but lowering that modern women need, and that such lowering needs to have a religious dimension.

Evocative of a shift from logos to eros, Christian to pagan, the episode begins when Hagar removes her hat and adorns herself with June bugs and rowanberries. And it is in this maenadic attire that she is found by Murray Ferney Lees, himself fleeing in scapegoat fashion from two dogs who would “have torn [him] to pieces.” (p. 222) In keeping with his surname, Lees produces a jug of wine and, with Hagar making her offering of soda biscuits, the two enjoy their “Eucharistic Banquet.” Lees then tells her of the “nothing meek” lusty-singing form of early Christian evangelicalism he had practiced and of how in this spirit he had met his wife and come to understand the divine ecstasy of sex: “in those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right out of heaven, if she’d been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn’t a sweeter place in this entire world.” (p. 227) Unfortunately, like Hagar who responds, “Well, that’s a mighty odd combination prayer and that,” Lees too feels that “God is love, but please don’t mention the two in the same breath.” (p. 228) Their son dies in a housefire while he and his wife are at a church service on the theme of the end of the world. Clearly,
then, according to Laurence, men like Lees and Bram have suffered as much from the other-worldly orientation of Christianity as have women.

Laurence’s immediate point, however is that Hagar is “not alone” in her grief, as the Reverend Troy had earlier tried to convince her. Lees’ confession leads to Hagar’s own therapeutic recollection of the night her son died. In this recollection, Laurence further emphasises the way in which lack of rituals and of such a religious role model as the “Sorrowful Mother” result in Hagar’s turning into “stone”. Simultaneously, Laurence ironically evokes as classical prototype for her protagonist, namely, Niobe, another “ubristic” woman who suffered the wrath of Apollo’s mother for boasting about her procreative abilities, and who wept for her lost children until her eyes and body became “dry”.

Provided with the advantage of confession and, significantly, not conscious of the fact that she has done so, Hagar is able to weep, the purgative aspect of which is also accompanied by her very real fit of vomiting.

The final phase of this revitalized ritual occurs when Hagar, unconsciously acts out her atonement with her son and, with Lees acting as his surrogate, receives his son’s forgiveness. As a result, Hagar “could even beg God’s pardon this moment, for thinking ill of him some time or other.” (p.248) Designed to express her gratitude to God, Hagar’s comment also suggests an understanding of what the Divine Parent may have felt in sacrificing his Son.

Yet ultimately it is indeed “God the Mother” who comes to Hagar’s aid in her last days, not in any individualized or other-wordly form but rather in the collective experience of love and maternity shared by the dying women who make up “the mewling nursery of old ladies,” (p.264) as Hagar at first sarcastically describes them. Significantly a trio - evocative of the Trinity and the triple aspect of the goddess in pagan mythology - each of these women has something in common with Hagar, which, however they manifest in positive and archetypal forms. Most articulate of the three is Eva Jardine, a skinny old crone of a woman who like Hagar stems from garden mother, and who finds her sustenance in her love for her husband. Second is Mrs.Dobereiner whose foreign tongue isolates her from her kind but who finds consolation in singing hymns about the true “home country” she expects to find after death; to these hymns the other women respond even without understanding the words. Finally there is Mrs.Reilly, like Hagar a ton of a woman but whose obesity makes her a type of “Great Mother” and whose prayers are addressed to the Roman Catholic equivalent of that primordial figure.

Reluctant at first to join the group, Hagar finally subconsciously acknowledges her sisterhood and her affiliation with these women’s mysteries when she joins the nightly litany:

Tom. Don’t you worry none-  
Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of—
Mein Gott, erlose mich—
You mind that time, Tom? I mind it so well—
I am sorry for having offended Thee, because I love—
Erlose mich von meinen Schmerzen—
Bram! (p.275)

And having found this kind of religious support system, Hagar can also acknowledge the Judaeo-Christian deity without lapsing into the role of a suppliant daughter: “Ought I to appeal? It’s the done thing. Our Father—no. I want no part of that. All I can think is—Bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I’ll not beg.” (p.307)

Margaret Laurence is thus profoundly concerned with the relationship between women’s identity and religious issues. She can be termed an, “evisionist” or
reformist—a feminist who finds many faults with the Judaeo-Christian tradition but still feels it possible to discover or recover a viable female ideology within that religious framework. The Stone Angel does not seem to support many feminist contentions but rather points to dimensions which have largely been ignored: namely, the way in which Judaeo-Christian tradition fosters egocentricity and in turn alienation and loneliness on account of its monotheistic character, the extent to which the decline of religious authority reverberates in the secular spheres, and the extent to which this decline can be traced to the aftermath of Renaissance individualism or to the rationalism of the eighteenth century.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

The Stone Angel is Laurence’s best known and most deeply respected novel. It is unique in being a novel of awakening. Carol Christ finds a common pattern in women’s spiritual quest. It begins with an experience of “nothingness” and ends with a new naming of self and reality. Christ gives a long list of ideas common to the novel of awakening. These are the survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present. Hagar Shipley’s spiritual quest begins with her experience of nothingness in her relationships with her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons. Hagar Shipley’s awakening is dependent upon her ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother. The other aspect of the novel discussed in the unit deals with the contention held by liberationists that a major factor preventing women from achieving a genuine sense of identity is the dominant philosophy embedded in Judaeo-Christian Theology. Evelyn J. Hinz has explored the connection between religious issues and female identity in The Stone Angel. She argues that the protagonists’ problems arise out of the religious climate in which she has been brought up. Hagar’s relationship with her father is not simply a modern version of the Electra Complex because of Judaeo-Christian traditions of emphasis on mental/male talents.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Cravat: a kind of neck cloth worn by men
Allegiance: relation or obligation to a sovereign
Individuated: individualised or given individuality
Ambivalence: coexistence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object.
Binary: composed of two, two fold
Permeable: worthy of penetration
Iconographically: by way of a portrait
Effeminacy: womanish softness or weakness, indulgence in unmanly pleasures.
Degeneracy: the process of departing from the high qualities of race or kind becoming base.
Egocentricity: self-contredness or regard only for the ego.
**The Stone Angel**

**Archetypal:** based on the original pattern or prototype

**Logos:** in the Stoic philosophy, the active principle living in and determining the world.

**Eros:** the Greek love-God.

**Hubris:** arrogance that invites disaster

**Maenadic:** in the manner of a female follower of Bacchus.

**Primordial:** existing from the beginning

**Litany:** a prayer in which the same thing is repeated several times.

### 3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Hagar is a true example of the mindset of a motherless woman. Do you agree with the statement? Why?
2. The spiritual journey of Hagar is a journey towards acceptance. Discuss.
3. How does Hagar’s encounter with Murray Lees help her in getting rid of some of her guilt complexes?
4. The Self-alienation in the case of Hagar is the consequence of her religious background. Substantiate this view from the text of *The Stone Angel*.

### 3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


