UNIT 4 MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In the earlier units some distinguished thematic aspects of *The Stone Angel* have been discussed. This unit takes up for analysis and discussion some technical aspects of the novel. First it deals with the title of the novel. With a view to establishing the appropriateness of the title various issues related to the term “stone angel” are discussed. The theme of redemption and the commendable use of imagery in *The Stone Angel* are also taken up. Laurence felt strongly about the significance of past and place in human affairs and in the moulding of human character. Therefore these two aspects of her fictional art are also being discussed in this unit.

4.1 *THE STONE ANGEL*: THE TITLE

For Margaret Laurence there is a lot in a name, in a title. “Titles” she says “are important as they should in some way express the theme of the book in a rather poetic way.” (Interview with Michel Fabre, *Etudes Canadiennes*, Vol. 77 (1981) p. 11-12)

The title which she chose for her first Canadian novel certainly fits her definition. Simone Vaughtier in her essay “Images in Stones, Images in Words” comments: “Solid and ethereal, opaque and spiritual, *The Stone Angel* confronts the reader with a challenge that is felt all the more because of the oxymoron quality of the phrase.” The critic further argues, “Announcing the new - the text to come—also resonates with the old: Thomas Wolfe’s lyrical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*. Hardly have we had time to puzzle about it, however when the narration blocks our flight of imagination by presenting us with a fictional referent for the title. “Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand….“ (p. 3)

As the opening paragraph describes the monument and the cemetery where blind and superlative it used to rise, the reader is taken on a tour of Manawaka’s burial ground - and of the novel’s major semantic polarities. We are in a sense reassured; so that is what the title refers to - this marble statue “brought from Italy at great expense,” (p. 3) erected in memory of the narrator-protagonists’ mother. Nevertheless, the prominence of the statue both in the cemetery and in the narrator’s memory and narration, the expansion of its oxymoronic features, as in “she viewed the town with sightless eyes” (p. 3) - all this points to its being, more than an element of the decor, a nexus of meaning which we are called upon to (re)construct.
4.2 THE STONE ANGEL: A REFERENTIAL OBJECT

The stone angel is one of the most important fictional objects in the novel. Three major characters—the protagonist Hagar, her father Jason Currie, her son John Shipley—are involved with the statue which thereby becomes an actant with a narrative function. What they do to it or about it, how they respond to it, what is means to them is of concern for readers as well as critics.

In the narrative chain of the novel the stone angel’s appearance recurs throughout. It figures more or less prominently in several episodes and forms what we call a motif. On its first appearance, the statue is the focal point of a lengthy and highly charged description of the Manawaka cemetery which as an introduction to the lost world of the narrators’ childhood, casts the long shadow of death over the ensuing narrative. The second occurrence is also descriptive: the narrator remembers that, leaving Manawaka and her husband Bram for good, she had had a last glimpse of the cemetery and the statue. In two other appearances, the stone angel is shown as the object of a series of actions and non-actions. On a drive to the cemetery with John, Hagar discovers that the statue lies “toppled over on her face” (p. 178) and that it has been painted with lipstick. Towards the end on a parallel visit with her son Marvin, the elderly Hagar observes certain changes in the angel. “The earth had heaved with frost around her, and she stood askew and tilted. Her mouth was white.” (p. 305) The memory leads the narrator to speculate on the future, in a matter-of-fact-way which acquires poignancy from the context: “Someday she’ll topple entirely and no one will bother to set her upright again.” (p. 305)

These occurrences bring to light a number of things. First, the stone angel has a story: the product of “gouging”, “gauging”, cynical descendants of Bernini, it has both an aesthetic ancestry in the baroque tradition and a mercantile one in the commercialisation of religious art intended to fulfil “the needs of fledging Pharaohs”. Brought into an uncouth land, the harsh environment of the prairie, it experiences decline. Like humans in flesh and blood, the stone angel, too is subject to vicissitudes of time, since winters and the earth have power over this representative of celestial creatures. Thus the angel motif emphasises the parallelism of her fate with that of human beings. From the very beginning the narrator, without telling us all that she knows addresses the statue as an animate being: “She viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind.” (p. 3)

Moreover, the statue’s story is also the story of some characters’ involvement with her. First there is Jason Currie, the Manawaka store-owner, who bought her “in pride to mark (his wife’s) bones.” (p. 3) He often tells his daughter that “she had been brought from Italy at a terrible expense and was pure white marble.” (p. 3) Currie’s claims about the statue connote more of the man and his values and of the culture in which he lives than they do about the artefact. In contrast with the protagonists’ father who had the statue erected, her son, it is intimated, is an iconoclast who defaces her with lipstick and overthrows her, an irreverent prank which bespeaks his need for rebellion—and then has to strive powerfully to restore her, on his mothers’ orders. Hagar cannot bear the idea of such profanation and cannot leave the statue or her son alone at this point in her life. In all three cases, the character’s willingness to take action, whether to pay or play with, or restore the angel, testifies to the importance of the monument as a sign in the narrated world.

4.3 THE STONE ANGEL: DIFFERENT MEANINGS

Each of the characters, of course, invests the statue with different meanings. For Jason Currie, the statue is associated with the dead wife to the memory of whom it has ostensibly been erected. But if it marks her bones, it is also intended to “proclaim his
As it displays his respect for the departed angel of his hearth, it also declares his own wealth, in a way acceptable to a 'Puritan' society, and his rank as one of Manawaka's foremost citizens. "She was the first, the largest and certainly the costliest." (p. 3) Although it is supposed to be "harking us all to heaven," (p. 3) what the grave marker encodes, in fact, is the "place of the living in the world of the living" a symbol of the ultimate otherness. It is also a rich socio-cultural sign.

Hagar, on the other hand, feels much more ambiguously towards the monument. At one point, the narrator affirms "I never could bear that statue" but events do not fully bear out that assertion. To her, the associations of the stone angel are necessarily double. It is linked with the mother who so easily "relinquished her feeble ghost," (p. 3) whose weakness Hagar openly despises. The stone angel emblematises the meekness of "that woman" whom she has never seen, the "fraility" which has been passed to her son Dan who dies young, and which the child Hagar cannot "help but detest". That is to say that the stone emblem of the mother is a reminder both of values which the narrator rejects and of the mortality against which, at the age of ninety, the narrator still keeps raging. Thus the stone angel, mother, death are inextricably and circularly related.

But "her mother's angel" (the phrase is hers) is also her father's monument, a symbol of his attitude towards his family, the community and life. To the extent that it is a reminder of his power and conventionality as well as of the struggles which she had to go through in order to assert herself, the statue is the repository of negative feelings and meanings. To the extent that it embodies paternal and societal values which she still shares, and to the extent that it is a symbol of Currie superiority, difference and triumph over oblivion, the monument cannot but have a positive dimension in Hagar's mind. When she discovers that it has toppled over, she is not only dismayed, she must set it up again. She scrubs off the vulgar pink of the lipstick herself and rationalises her behaviour to her son, explaining that she does not want the Manawaka people to know that such a "wanton thing" could be done to the Currie monument. She is apprehensive further suspecting that since the Simmons plot is just across the way", her childhood rival Lottie would tell everyone. She appears to be motivated only by her recurring worry about what people will think. And even at this level, her concern with appearances reveals how much she shares her father's attitude and small-town mentality and how she extends to the stone angel the function of representing the family and the family's respectability. Hence, for the reader, the image which she wants to project of herself is bound up with the statue.

What is to her a desecration is to John an amusing prank. "Beside me, John laughed. The old lady's taken quite a header." (p. 178) He repeatedly suggests that they should leave her lying on her side and painted, which he considers an improvement: "She looks a damn sight better, if you ask me." (p. 179) Obviously, he has no reverence for the monument and the Currie greatness it represents. His disregard of respectability, on this occasion as on many others, proves him a Shipley rather than a Currie, despite Hagar's insistence to the contrary. Indeed, when he ironically agrees with his mother that to have Lottie spread the news about the angel "would be an everlasting shame, all right," (p. 180) the antiphrase echoes one which Bram Shipley had made in another context. Simon Vauthier argues that there is perhaps more to John's attitude than unconcern about public opinion and general irreverence. In the cemetery scene, a verbal clue sets up a connection between the stone angel and Hagar, when John personifies the statue as "the old lady." The connection in itself would perhaps go unnoticed if it did not recall, and contrast with, an earlier designation when John called his mother "angel". Mother as angel, angel as old lady, the two namings work together to establish a strong link between the living woman and the statue. In this view, the prank on the one becomes a displaced aggression on the other. Moreover, John's attempts to persuade his prim and proper mother to leave the statue alone can be regarded as hints that Hagar should cast off the burden of respectability. His warning that putting back the stone angel is not really worth the risk, acquires metaphorical overtones: "Don't be surprised if she collapses and I break a bone. That
The Stone Angel

would be great, to break your back because a bloody marble angel fell on you.” (p. 178) While John may be aware of the statue as a weight not only of marble but of propriety, one can fully appreciate the symbolic adumbration of the character’s fate: John is crushed by the burden of his mother’s self-centred expectations and fear of life. In this context, the epithet “bloody” does not function simply as an expletive connoting rejection of polite language and social conventions, or the young man’s plebeian heritage; it also functions poetically as a qualifier of “marble angel” to form an oxymoron, which points to and enhances the contradiction of the stone angel and of the woman of which it is a symbol.

4.4 THE FUNCTIONS OF THE STONE ANGEL

To start with, the stone angel is the first actant mentioned. “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...” (p. 3) Its apparition in the text is almost concomitant with the emergence of the narrative voice. More importantly it coincides with the beginning of what proves to be an autobiographical relation, just as in the represented universe it is linked with the actor’s birth. From its first description, it is clear that the role of the angel is going to be very important, if not in the action, at least in the construction of the novel’s meanings. Because it so conspicuously marks a grave and seemingly operates a disjunction between the living and the dead, the sightless statue may blind us momentarily with the dark dazzle of death. At first one may be aware mostly of its negativity: its lack of sight or knowledge, in particular, is repeatedly indicated, often with words or syntagms which are themselves negative forms (“sightless”, “doubly blind”, “unendowed with even a pretense of sight”, “blank”, “without knowing who we were at all”). However, such negative features are counterbalanced by verbs which denote a contrary activity, “she viewed”, “harking us all to heaven”. We soon apprehend that it must play a structuring role in the expansion of the narrative.

From the very beginning, the stone angel appears as a figure both of disjunction and of conjunction. As an actant in the narrative, it emphasises the separation between the living and the dead, this world and the other, the pride of the survivors and the power of death, the “dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead” and the disorder of nature, on the one hand, and the messiness of life (symbolised here by the disreputable old Mrs Weese and her sick-smelling sheets which foreshadow later conditions in Hagar’s life), on the other hand. At the same time, in the textual weave, these dichotomies are overcome by a series of semiotic linkages. Eventually, the statue must be seen as partaking of both the natural and the supernatural.

If, on one level of analysis, one may claim, as Sandra Djwa does, that it is a form without spirit, a monument to purity and propriety, on a semiotic level, it remains associated with things spiritual: the marble form functions as a sign, almost a signal: “harking us all to heaven”, it has a message, socially coded, to be sure, yet distinct from the more secular “purpose” it assumes for its buyer. An image of a supernatural being, it also attests to man’s cultural efforts to manage death and control nature, thereby bringing together several dimensions of human experience.

Throughout, the blank statue in the Manawaka cemetery is projected against a background of angelic information – concerning the angels of the dictionary, “ministering angels”, “angels of mercy” and the like, the angels of the encyclopedia scriptural and theological – angels as lesser breeds of powers and dominations, messengers of God and the divine -, but also literary – the angels of Milton and others. Singularly, the opening description calls to mind the line from Lycidas, “Look homeward, angel, and melt with ruth” which Thomas Wolfe used as the title of his first published autobiographical novel. From her hilltop, our angel looks homeward towards the town and what turns out to be the bleak lives of its inhabitants. Though it
certainly does not melt with ruth, the possibility has been sown in the minds of the readers aware either of the Miltonic line or simply of the compassionate qualities ascribed to angels. That is to say, because of the vast intertext in which angels play a part, Margaret Laurence’s angel reverberates from the start with imaginary resonances that go far beyond the immediate context.

Another important function the stone angel performs is to magnetise recurring notations and images into semantic and thematic patterns that heighten the unity of the novel, and the angel motif with its inner tensions, in fact, energises the plot. There is a strong growing identification which the text builds up between Hagar and the stone angel. That the stubbornly erect Hagar will somehow be brought low in the narrative is programmed in the angel matrix. A foreshadowing of the ultimate fall into oblivion is even presented through yet a different version of the angel motif. After evoking her nights with Bram and how she “prided herself upon keeping [her] pride intact, like some maidenhead” (p. 81) (an example incidentally, which illustrates the self-generating circularity of pride), Hagar comments on her present loneliness:

My bed is as cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow, and they would spread their arms and sweep them down to their sides, and when they rose, there would be the outline of an angel with spread wings. The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard and freeze. (p. 81)

The juxtaposition of past and present nights too establishes some relation of cause and effect between the past pride and the present dereliction of the character. Her loneliness is bodied forth in a series of analogies and metaphors which compellingly fuse the horizontal position, the angel figure, sleep, winter and snow into a muted but clear adumbration of death. Here again, angel and death are joined, yet the angel stretched on the ground is a child-made silhouette. Although it is contextualised back into the familiar cluster of death symbolism, this angel appears also as a shadow figure, a sort of double. And thus, beyond the bit of Canadian folklore, we are referred to our angelic intertext — to the idea of the angel as guardian spirit, as the double that stands for the higher part of our nature. This other conception of angels also fleetingly recurs in a humorous remark which Hagar makes about the minister who pays her a visit: “He stares upward at the air, as though birdwatching. Perhaps he hopes for a discarded angel feather to drift down and spur him on.” (p. 119) Even if we take into account that Hagar is making fun of the clumsy young minister, the reference is, if I may say so to the real thing, the heavenly creature which contrasts with the cemetery angels of rigid wings. Furthermore, although synecdochically represented by a feather, the angel is supposed to play his role of spiritual inspiration.

If Hagar’s ‘fall’ is programmed in the controlling image, it also proves a happy fall, for when, stripped of her mask of strength, she confronts her destructiveness and her fear of death, she can experience some sort of belated spiritual regeneration which Margaret Laurence presents very convincingly through Hagar’s retreat and decent to Shadow Point, the meeting with another ‘liminal’, and the confrontation of past ghosts, the apologies she deliriously makes to John, and so on. The outcome of this process is – the (unconscious) realization of angelism and the breaking of the petrification process.

### 4.5 THE BIBLICAL ANGEL

Finally, in the episode that shows best the regeneration of Hagar, the angel motif in its positive aspect is foregrounded again. Now the reference is to the last meeting between Hagar and the son whom she had not wanted, whom she considered was none of her but who has cared for her in her old age. For once, Hagar, not knowing
what possesses her, tells Marvin that she is frightened. The unusual admission incites Marvin to apologise for having been crabby with her. And the scene develops in this way:

I stare at him. Then, quite unexpectedly, he reaches for my hand and holds it tightly.

Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength, and bargaining. I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

It’s in my mind to ask for his pardon, but that’s not what he wants from me.

‘You’ve not been cranky, Marvin. You’ve been good to me, always. A better son than John.’ (p. 304)

To Hagar, this is “a lie, yet not a lie” but her belief that it is a lie measures all the better how far she has come from angelism, from the girl who did not want to impersonate her mother. She has been humanised, and now understands the needs of Marvin, to the extent that she gives up the idea of asking him for his pardon and instead tells him what she knows he needs from her. The dying woman seems unaware that her sense of what Marvin is attempting echoes her earlier image of John, as he struggled with the statue in the Manawaka cemetery.

I wish he [John] could have looked like Jacob then, wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no. He sweated and grunted angrily. His feet slipped and he hit his forehead on a marble ear, and swore. (p. 179)

In both cases, Hagar, whose imagination has been fed on the Book casts her sons in the same biblical role of Jacob, who incidentally was his mother’s favourite. But in the first, the analogy, which reveals that like her father and husband she is not without dynastic hopes, works by contrast to suggest her disappointment. John is no Jacob but a man engaged in an awkward task, who grunts and slips, sweats and swears. Hagar’s angelism is frustrated by the incident. Ready as she was to impose biblical symbolism on the scene, she is not prepared to invest it with another meaning. This remains for the reader to seek. In the context, the stone angel appears metonymically and metaphorically linked to Hagar, to the burden of the demands which, angel that she is, she makes on her family and on John in particular. On the other hand, though John, as we have seen, seems to identify symbolically the stone angel with his mother, he is not trying to wrest a blessing from her. Only the overthrow of the angel would be liberating, but, because he is more Shipley than Currie, he complies with the wishes of the phallic mother and restores the phallic statue. Introduced only to be denied, the biblical analogy, however, cannot be fully neutralised. And the absence of the Angel of God who wrestled with Jacob until he could bless him creates a vacuum which the text later partially fills with the return to the Old Testament motif in the scene with Marvin.

While the first occurrence of the motif displays Hagar’s disappointed expectations and reveals her self-deception, the second signals a moment of understanding. consequent upon the recognition of the destructiveness of her pride. This time, Hagar perceives Marvin, her neglected, belittled son, as Jacob – as the heir of her dynasty and of God’s promise. The realisation, however, is slightly ambiguous. “Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob,” (p. 304) she says. What with “now” which may be opposed to then, and with “is truly” opposed to “I wish he could have looked like Jacob,” (p. 179) it seems as if Hagar were confusing Marvin with John, mixing up her responses to her two sons into one recognition. This time the son is “gripping with all his strength, and bargaining,” not grunting, not yielding, he is wrestling with the messenger of God. This time, too, Hagar’s use of the biblical metaphor implicates
her: “I see I am thus strangely cast.” (p.304) She again is the angel. But no longer unwittingly, no longer adhering to a false ideal – playing instead a role she had never understood. No longer the stone angel, but the angel of God, and therefore able to release and be released. No longer a destructive victim of angelism but the embodiment of a force that is not hers alone, that has blocked Marvin’s past life but can bless/liberate him into his full identity as his mother’s son. (Through the encounter with the Angel, the biblical Jacob knows himself as Israel). The angel here is not “antipathetic to life” – Douglas Killam’s phrase to define the stone angel. On the contrary, it is life-enhancing. Strikingly, Hagar’s recognition of her bond to her son and of her spiritual power comes to her when she has relinquished “angelism”.

4.6 MOVING AWAY FROM THE STONE ANGELS/THE THEME OF REDEMPTION IN THE NOVEL

In her interview with Michel Fabre and elsewhere, Margaret Laurence has spoken of the sense of redemption in the novel. For Laurence survival does not mean physical survival alone. For her it is the survival of the spirit. She tells Michel Fabre:

“I mean survival of the spirit with some ability to give and receive love. In what happens to Hagar at the very end of the novel there is to me some sense of redemption. Close to the end of her life she for the first time, really can admit to herself, when she says “Pride is my wilderness”,..... that she has been unable to give and receive the kind of love she was capable of.”

The Stone Angel certainly builds up a thematics of salvation. True, there is no supernatural intercession, not even a fully realised conversion on the character’s part. Presbyterian born and bred as she is, Hagar often refers to God but she cannot believe in his mercy. Her conversations with the minister, or her refusal at the end to appeal to God proves this:

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)

Towards the end, she seems to believe in the possibility of an after-life. The prayer quoted above follows immediately upon a meditation on breathing – a condition of human life – and whether there might still be breathing “elsewhere”, in an after-life. “If it happened that way, I’d pass out in amazement. Can angels faint?” (p.307) This playful speculation hints that Hagar would like to believe in the existence of angels in heaven, of celestial hosts she might join. At any rate, the speculation keeps alive the angel paradigm in the narrative.

Whatever the character’s notions, the novel supports the idea that redemption is possible. In this respect, Hagar is the first adumbration of the protagonist in Margaret Laurence’s last novel. Of Morag, Margaret Laurence has said that “she comes closer to what might be termed the God within,” and the novelist further generalises: “I don’t have a traditional religion but I believe that there’s a mystery at the core of life.” (Interview with Michel Fabre. p. 16) This is an important clue to her fiction and to The Stone Angel in particular. Hagar’s regeneration is a coming closer to the God within, a result and a token of the mystery at the core of life. This sense of mystery the writer weaves into the fabric of the narrative largely through the angel imagery. The angel, among other things, is the symbol of that part of our nature which transcends nature but cannot be separated from it, however the practitioners of “angelism” may strive to dissociate the two. As the symbol of the spiritual, the mysterious, the angel is very remote from the conventional figure of purity. Thus we find Murry Lees, the shabby little man who does represent a form of humility and love in the novel, juxtaposing angels and sexuality in his praise of his wife:
In those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right down from 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)

Murray Lees sees no disparity between the two talents of his wife, one linking her with angels, the other with one of the sons of men, even though a narrow-minded puritan religion has made her ashamed of her second talent.

With this widening of the angel paradigm, we have left the referential stone angel far behind. As Margaret Laurence said to Michel Fabre, the stone angel in the cemetery is something she needed for her introduction. We might add that she needed it for her whole novel. In the same interview, the writer affirms that the stone angel in the novel is not the biblical angel of the myth and while asserting that it “does dominate the book like an imposing symbol” she limits its role to the symbolising of the blindness of pride—an aspect of it which many critics have emphasised.

While it is difficult to claim that the angel in the novel functions as the biblical angel (but which angel is Margaret Laurence referring to, one wonders?), there are direct echoes, of the Bible, and the motif as it invests the text becomes itself invested with more and more meaning. An oxymoronic signifier, ‘the stone angel’ straddles the animate and the non-animate, the earthly and the heavenly, death and life, and so on. Exploring and exploiting some of these contradictions, the novel gathers them all into a coincidentia oppositorum in which the socially coded statue of the Manawaka world turns into an emblem of the human predicament. Eventually, the stone angel stands for death-in-life and life-in-death. In the last analysis, it may also serve as a self-reflexive symbol of the work itself, a verbal monument which representing life cannot but inscribe death, and inscribing death ultimately asserts life. In this view, the work itself appears as a monument to the writer’s past, factual or phantasmatic— a monument which the reader must deface, upset and restore before it can yield a spiritual depth.

4.7 USE OF IMAGERY IN THE STONE ANGEL

Images, metaphors and symbols, the privileged tools of literary creation hold true for most fiction, but they are particularly relevant in the case of Laurence’s works. A web of intricate images is the technical excellence of The Stone Angel. The universality of the theme, and the intricacy of the images, make The Stone Angel a novel that readily lends itself to textual analysis along new critical lines. Students are sometimes surprised by questions on Hagar’s prairie environment, as if it were irrelevant. But Hager is a Scots- Presbyterian from the Canadian West, and her perceptions grow from these roots. The starkly beautiful Manitoba land becomes the analogue for her conflicts. The Manawaka cemetery for example holds formal peonies and upstart ants; wildflowers encroach on its tenuous order. The theme of pride as an isolating wilderness is caught in the class structured guest list of Manawakan parties. Japanese porch lanterns hung from wooden gingerbread trim, are ironic reminders of the exclusion of Orientals from full participation in Canadian society, an exclusion which is the indirect source of Hagar’s West Coast job as housekeeper.

By juxtaposition Laurence establishes subtle parallels between the town’s social hegemony (shanties and brick houses), its harsh climate contrasts in prairie environment suggest paradoxes in human nature. These include muddy farmyards awash in urine, skeletal machinery and lilacs, “a seasonal mercy.” Chokecherries sting sweetly. The “heedless and compelled” sap of Manitoba maples suggest
Hagar’s sexual attraction to Bram, but the pride which makes her conceal her enjoyment of their sexual relation, acts once again, to isolate her.

Prairie weather provides analogues for pride, passion, fear, and for Puritan culture whose flaws and strengths provoke ambivalent feelings in Laurence. Bram’s beloved horse Solder freezes to death in a storm; ironically, his fatal freedom stemmed from Bram’s fear of fire. As a girl in town, Hagar feels secure during storms, but on the farm storms mean dangerous isolation. Fire and snow, the refrain in Piquette’s Song in The Diviners, is the culmination of many scenes in the Manawaka books that anchor these images of human pain and passion in prairie weather and culture.

The sight, feel, smell of the land and the culture run through every paragraph. Hagar’s arthritic muscles and veins are like pieces of binder twine in her legs. Twenty-four years of bickering with Bram is a prairie river “scoured away like sandbacks.” (p. 116) The things Hagar sees as she leaves Manawaka, image the death of her relation with Bram: the cemetery; the railway buildings and water tower painted blood-red, black trees, and farms lost and smothered in winter landscape. The pain of this departure and her latent guilt, are suggested through a prairie thunderstorm where lightning rends the sky “like an angry claw at the cloak of God.” (p. 161)

The terrible depression of the 1930s, and the drought that compounded its effect in the Canadian West, coincides with Bram’s death. Neglected farmhouses and rusty machinery resemble aging bodies; boarded windows are bandaged eyes; warped building “wore a caved-in look like toothless jaws,” (p.169) sunflowers hang empty as unfilled honeycombs; air and land are bone-dry, deathly. Hard work and laziness now yield the same result: nothing. This blunt fact of prairie life in the thirties takes on symbolic meaning in Hagar’s decision to let Bram and her father share one tombstone: “They are only different sides of the same coin, anyway, he and the Curries.” (p. 184) Biblical analogues spring to mind, such as the parable of the worker who begins his labors late in the day, or St. Paul’s reminder that salvation is not bought with works.

One form of pride, or bondage involves Canada’s native people. Indian and Metis compose Manawaka’s social rejects. The Stone Angel touches lightly on a theme that looms larger as the Manawaka cycle progresses. Its opening scene evokes the native people through the wild, musky things on the edge of the town’s orderly cemetery. Such plants had flourished when Cree “with enigmatic faces and greasy hair” (p.5) were the sole inhabitants of the prairie bluffs.

Examples of racial prejudice are unobtrusive, but form a pattern. Matt would have liked to shoot and set trap lines with Jules Tonnerre at Galloping Mountain, but Jason Currie forbids his teenage son to associate with half-breeds. Bram is initially condemned for having been seen with half-breed girls, and continues to joke and drink with Metis after his marriage to Hagar. She is attracted by his dark good looks “I thought he looked a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face,” (p. 45) but soon comes to share in local prejudices. Hagar despises herself for being forced to serve thethreshers, “a bunch of breeds and ne’er-do-wells and Galicians” (p.114) She refuses to believe John when he describes the Tonnerre shack as passably clean. Her humiliation in Currie’s General Store when Bram is suspected of buying lemon extract for resale to Indians triggers her decision to leave. When John tells Hagar, later, of the death of Bram’s old metis cronny, Hagar replies (albeit with a bad conscience) “Good riddance to bad rubbish.” (p. 176)

John’s rebellious nature is expressed in part through his friendship with the Tonnerres. As a child, John trades the family crest-pin to Lazarus Tonnerres for a knife, one which Morag inherits in The Diviners. As adolescents, John and the Metis boys dare one another to hair-raising escapades. John’s death on the railway trestle bridge is the result of a drunken response to a drunken Metis dare. Indirectly, Hagar is partly responsible, having driven John to desperation and drink by plotting to separate him from Arlene. Symbolically, the tragedy suggests that the destinies of
whites and Metis in Canada are conjoined, a theme to be developed at much greater length in *The Diviners*.

Hagar’s rebelliousness is expressed in the novel’s epigraph “Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light” and the title image. The latter metaphor, like Dylan Thomas’s injunction to “rage” against death, catches much of the paradoxical quality of human existence. Hagar’s rage, which involves the pride that prevents her from rejoicing, is also her stubborn love of life, her courage, her fighting spirit—qualities lacking in her brothers. The tragic aspect of her experience, her alienation, is thus inseparably united with her admirable fighting spirit. Like the wounded gull in the cannery, Hagar’s strength is both her glory and her doom. There is no place for quietism in Laurence’s creed.

From a thematic point of view, the five Canadian books (four novels and a collection of short stories) belong to the classic genre of the novel of initiation and self-discovery, implying the protagonists progress from inexperience and innocence to a form of knowledge, which is gradually achieved through a series of trials, affected by inner and external circumstances and chance encounters with other characters, the quest culminating in a revelation or epiphany—the climax of the inner change. In such a perspective, sight as a traditional symbol of intellectual and spiritual awareness stands most naturally as the key element of the pursuit. Chantal Arlertaz argues that “each of Laurence’s work set in Canada describes the search for a kind of truth or inner depth, something beyond the immediately visible, through an initiatory travel from blindness to self-awareness. Her five women protagonists are all to some extent victims of outward appearances including their own selves; each of them exemplifies one particular weakness or shortcoming conveyed through visual imagery.” The blind stone angel in *The Stone Angel*, in terms of visual symbolism represents the blindness of Hagar, the protagonists who could not look beyond appearances.

Structurally speaking, the image of the stone angel unifies the novel. The actual angel marks the grave of Hagar’s mother who died in giving birth to her stubborn daughter. Purchased to proclaim the Curie dynasty, the angel is doubly blind, carved without eyeballs by cynical stonemasons (Hagar thinks) who accurately gauged “the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land.” (p.3) Like Jason’s church contribution the statue is pride made visible, blind to the needs of others and to the deepest needs of self. As the proud product of an Eastern finishing school, Hagar is “Pharaoh’s daughter reluctantly returning to his roof.” (p.43) As she leaves the town and her husband, Hagar sees the stone angel in the cemetery, sightlessly guarding emptiness and death. Bram’s senility fills her with anger at fate, or God, “for giving us eyes but almost never sight.” (p.173) John, who has his own blindness, wrestles with the angel in the cemetery while Hagar looks on. Later, it stands crookedly over two men’s graves. The irascible Hagar, prisoner by flesh and pride, waits “stonily” for poor Mr. Troy. In this paradoxical image the stone half (bondage) is more prominent than the linked suggestions of light, love, freedom, and life.

The novel’s structure depends as much upon a web of interlocking images as upon its handling of time through flashbacks. Prominent among these patterns are those of houses and birds, archetypal metaphors for human experience which are as old as language itself. Northrop Frye points to two contrasting worlds of metaphoric organization, one desirable and the other undesirable. He calls these the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively, terms that are useful in analyzing Laurence’s image patterns.

The demonic world of bondage, pain and confusion is suggested in *The Stone Angel* by the wilderness/Pharaoh pattern and by maimed and captive birds. The sight of Silverthreads a home for the elderly which Hagar envisages as a prison, sets her heart pulsing against its cage of bones “like a berserk bird.” (p.95) The gull trapped like Hagar in the old cannery, is wounded by her as it screams their common fear. Horrified Hagar recalls its free soaring. The gull’s broken wing reduces it to the level to which age has reduced Hagar, its strength becomes a hazard. Two dogs sound like
merciless wolfish fiends. Hagar’s curiosity and fear are answered by the arrival of Murray Lees. The wounded bird that drew the hounds off Murray’s trail now appears as scapegoat and sacrificial victim: the demonic parody of Eucharist symbolism in the apocalyptic world.

Chickens serve as a frequent form of demonic bird imagery. The Manawaka dump, which figures much more prominently in The Diviners, is the stage here for a grotesque and sickening scene in Hagar’s childhood. A load of spoiled eggs has hatched in the summer sun. The feeble, foodless chicks are prisoner by their shells and by each other. Hagar, for reasons she does not understand as a child refuses to help Lottie kill the chicks; at ninety, still puzzled she thinks it was right to refrain, although her reasons are obscure to her.

Worth remembering is the incident when Hagar, en route to Silverthreads thinks of calves struggling to be born. She has always had a fellow feeling for anything struggling into life. We remember it with new force as Hagar and Lottie Simmons sit plotting the separation of their adult children, pretending it is for John and Arlene’s good. The two old women attempt to haggle with fate. They agree that Arlene should be sent East until she and John can afford to marry. Hagar and Lottie see the stifling of John and Arlene’s relationship as a mercy-killing. At this point, Hagar remembers the bloody chicks, but Lottie has completely repressed the incident.

A concordance would reveal the remarkable frequency of bird patterns. Hagar in hospital, in a restraint, is like a trussed fowl. In the cannery memories swoop like gulls, and the prospect of confronting herself is imaged as a fearsome storm which might sweep bird out to sea and drawn into its depths “as still and cold as black glass.” (p.235) Discovered by Marvin, Hagar is “an old hawk caught.” (p.251) Hospitalized, her pain beats its wings against her rib cage, while nearby voices like birds caught inside a building are heard.

Birds with their power of flight, are traditional emblems of freedom and the human spirit. Laurence uses this archetype in her pun which recurs in the Manawaka fiction. The demonic form of the image, the captive bird which in prairie folklore portends death, also recurs. The title story of A Bird in the House concerns the death of Vanessa’s father and the young girl’s loss of religious faith. But the larger narrative of Vanessa’s maturation restores to the bird image its apocalyptic suggestions of spirit and freedom. The latter suggest the partial and hard-won freedom of the young adult. It includes an understanding and acceptance of her people and her culture, an inheritance which proclaims itself in her veins.

Houses and furnishing form another prominent image pattern. They serve as analogues for human bodies and by extension, human lives. Lamps and chairs are memories made visible. Laurence’s image patterns reflect her wit. Hagar’s first experience of sex provides a comical house metaphor: the bride had not known she has “a room to house such magnitude.” (p.52) The hen house surrounded by chicken wire sags bunchily “like bloomers without elastic.” (p.114) The abandoned house at Shadow Point another container for Hagar and her memories has no lock; this mock castle like her aging body affords neither privacy nor defense.

In the final analysis one can say that in the field of literary creative vision, Laurence has played the part of an interpreter, providing the reader’s imagination with a certain vision of the world achieved through the use of language, the choice of themes, characters, narrative patterns, and imagery.

4.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAST

Graham Greene is of the opinion that a writer’s “whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share.” (As quoted by Margaret Laurence in A Place to Stand On, Edmonton Ne West Press, 1983, p.15)
Margaret Laurence admits that Graham Green is right in this statement. She believes that for the writer one way of discovering oneself is through the exploration inherent in the writing itself. According to her a great many writers, at all points attempt to understand their background and their past sometimes even a more distant past which they have not personally experienced. This sort of exploration is very clearly seen in the works of contemporary African writers who recreate their peoples’ past in novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value. They have found it necessary in other words to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being stifled or threatened by that past.

Margaret Laurence realised that much and her own writing had followed the same pattern – “the attempt to assimilate the past, partly in order to be freed from it, partly in order to try to understand myself and perhaps others of my generation, through seeing where we had come from.” (A Place to Stand On p.15) In The Stone Angel Margaret Laurence has approached her own background, her own past through her grandparent’s generation the generation of pioneers of Scots-Presbyterian origin, who had been among the first to people the town she calls Manawaka. This was where her own roots began. Other past generations of her father’s generation had lived in Scotland, but for her, her people’s real past – her own real past – was not connected except distantly with Scotland, indeed this was true for Hagar as well for she was born in Manawaka.

From the point of view of characterization also, the past plays a significant role. Like humans in real life, great fictional personalities are not static; they evolve, accumulate and alter with age. The notions of inheritance and survival, which Laurence says are essential to all her novels, implicate a character in time, binding her to past and future. David J. Jeffery argues that “Laurence’s fascination with time is peculiarly Canadian because it reflects our belief in the existence, utility, and necessity of historical meaning. People cannot understand themselves or their plight in isolation; they need the context of larger cultural forces.” When Laurence’s characters speak in the voice of memory, they register the passing of time in their style, and by speaking, they seek to ease the burden of the past.

The Past is a lingering presence in the narrator’s mind. He or she must disentangle a network of temporal pressures from personal and ancestral pasts, from family inheritance, from historical and legndry traditions. Time itself becomes integral to Laurence’s themes and techniques. Because the stories are told in retrospect, the very act of recalling enters into the drama, making memory an important structural principle, a means of both recognition and deception, and a power for integrating past and present in a meaningful whole. Memory becomes a creative power that artfully surveys the past.

In The Stone Angel it is weaving of the past and the present strands that makes the final fabric of the work. Through an alternating pattern we are given the story of Hagar’s life and the account of her last struggle to maintain her independence. When the weaving is done we see her as a character portrayed with deep understanding and sympathy. Alone, by the edge of the sea, she takes refuge from storm and cold in a crumbling cannery. Hagar reviews the darkest moment of her life—the deaths of her drunken husband and her favourite son John. Then into the blackness of her night comes a fool – a vague parallel to Lear’s fool – a tippling insurance salesman, Murray F. Lees. Together they fill their bellies with cheap red wine, then tell each other, sad tales of loss and of sorrow. And to Hagar as she listens to Lees and as she receives from him understanding and kindness, comes understanding of self and the realisation that tragedy is the common lot of man.

By reviewing her past, Hagar, the old stone angel receives eyes and sees with terrifying clarity that she herself has been the cause of her blackened years. “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) Such profound understanding of oneself is the reward of looking back in Margaret Laurence's fiction.

4.9 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MANAWAKA

Margaret Laurence admits that "much of my writing relates to the kind of prairie town in which I was born and in which I first began to be aware of myself, writing, for me has to be set firmly in some soil, some place, some outer and inner territory which might be described in anthropological terms as "cultural background". She further says, "The name Manawaka is an invented one, but it had been in my mind since I was about seventeen or eighteen, when I first began to think about writing something set in a prairie town. Manawaka is not my home town of Neepawa although it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the Hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, as Graham Greene says, which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share." (A Place to Stand On. p.16-17)

While talking about the influence of a place on one's writing Margaret Laurence argues that a place influences the writing in two ways. "First, the physical presence of the place itself - its geography, its appearance. Second, the people. For me, the second aspect of environment is the most important, although in everything I have written which is not set in Canada, whether or not actually set in Manitoba, somewhere where some of my memories of the physical appearance of the prairies come in. I had, as a child and as an adolescent, ambiguous feelings about the prairies. I still have them, although they no longer bothered me. I wanted to go out of the small town and go far away, and yet I felt the protectiveness of that atmosphere, too. I felt the loneliness and the isolation of the land itself and yet I always considered southern Manitoba to be very beautiful, and I still do. I doubt if I will ever live there again, but those poplar bluffs and the blackness of that soil and the way in which the sky is open from one side of the horizon to the other, these are things I will carry inside my skull for as long as I live, with the vividness of recall that only our first home can have for us." (A Place to Stand On. p.16)

"Nevertheless, the people were more important than the place. Hagar in The Stone Angel was not drawn from life, but she incorporates many of the qualities of my grandparent's generation. Her speech is their speech, and her gods their gods. I think I never recognized until I wrote that novel just how mixed my own feelings were towards that whole generation of pioneers- how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of them, and how willing to show anger. And yet, they had inhabited a wildness and made it fruitful. They were in the end great survivors and for that I love and value them." (A Place to Stand On. p.17)

About the possibility of an inhibiting or negative fallout of cultural background, Laurence comments, "But I do not believe that this kind of writing needs to be parochial. If Hagar in The Stone Angel has any meaning, it is the same as that of an old woman anywhere, having to deal with the reality of dying. On the other hand, she is not an old woman anywhere. She is very much a person who belongs in the same kind of prairie Scot - Presbyterian background as I do, and it was of course, people like Hagar who created that background with all its flaws and strengths." (A Place to Stand On. p.17)
Margaret Laurence believed that titles express the theme of the book in a poetic way. The title of *The Stone Angel* points to a nexus of meaning which the reader is called upon to reconstruct. The stone angel is the most important referential object in the novel. Three major characters – the protagonist Hagar, her father Jason Currie, her son John Shipley, are involved with the statue. What it means for each one of them and how they respond to it is important for both the readers and the critics. For Jason Currie, the statue displays his respect for his dead wife and proclaims his dynasty. It is a rich socio-cultural sign. Hagar’s attitude towards the Stone Angel is ambiguous. It is linked with the mother whose weakness Hagar openly despises. It also embodies, for her, the paternal and societal values which she shares and is a symbol of Currie superiority. When she discovers that it has toppled over she is not only dismayed, she must set it up again. John has no reverence for the statue and the Currie greatness it represents. The stone angel performs a very important role in the construction of the novel’s meaning and a structuring role in the expansion of the narrative. In the episode that shows the regeneration of Hagar the angel motif is again in the foreground.

The technical excellence of *The Stone Angel* is largely due to a web of intricate images. Muddy farmyards, skeletal machinery, Manitoba maples, prairie weather, Hagar’s arthritic muscles and veins, the remarkable bird imagery and above all the stone angel serve as powerful images that convey the social and psychological implication of events, places and characters. For Margaret Laurence all writing is an exploration with a view to understanding oneself. For understanding oneself one has to understand one’s background one’s past because then alone can one get rid of the burden of the past and make some progress towards understanding others. Hagar confronts her past, analyses it and then alone she makes her limited entry into a world of joy and peace. Laurence also believes that a place, influences the writer in two ways. First the physical geography, its appearance, and second, the people. In her writing one can find both the influences of what she calls a “cultural background.”

**4.11 GLOSSARY**

- **Oxymoronic:** Combination of contradictory terms so as to form an expressive phrase or epithet.
- **Semantic:** relating to meaning especially of words.
- **Polarity:** State of having two opposite poles: the condition of having properties different or opposite.
- **Paradigm:** example.
- **Iconoclast:** a breaker of images.
- **Straddle:** favourable to both sides.
- **Emblematises:** to represent to the mind something different from itself.
- **Adumbration:** foreshadowing.
- **Expletive:** a word inserted to fill up a sentence or line of verse.
- **Plebian:** a member of a despised social class.
Desication: an act of profanation
Apparition: appearance
Concomitant: he, who or that which accompanies.
Disjunction: the act of separation
Syntagms: a systematic body, system or group.
Silhouette: a shadow outline filled in with black
Synecdochically: by putting part for the whole, or the whole for part.
Metonymically: a trope in which the name of one thing is put for that of another related to it, the effect for the cause
Intercession: act of intercedings or pleading for another.

4.12 QUESTIONS

1. Do you think *The Stone Angel* is an appropriate title? Give reasons.
2. Give in brief the different meanings given to the stone angel by Hagar, Jason Currie and John.
3. What are the various functions the stone angel performs in the novel?
4. Comment upon the nature and significance of bird imagery in *The Stone Angel*.
5. What is the significance of the past for Margaret Laurence. How does Hagar tackle her past and what is the reward she gets?

4.13 BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the preparation of this Block I have heavily depended on the following reading list:


