

A FEMINIST READING OF "THE STONE ANGEL"

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THE STONE ANGEL is a carefully organized novel which operates on two obvious levels: the present time of the novel which takes us through Hagar's last days on earth, and the past time of memory which moves us in strict chronological order through the major events of her life to explain the old woman whom we see now. In support of this structure, we are made to sense the physically decrepit Hagar as a mask behind which the true Hagar continues to reside. The novel is also elaborately based upon the biblical stories of Hagar and Jacob and upon sacramental patterns of confession and communion, so that the reader may well arrive at yet another sense of the novel's two dimensions: in the foreground (both past and present) we have the realistic tale of a woman's pride, and in the background (where confirmations or hidden meanings are supposed to lie) a Christian context within which we are to measure the significance of that pride. Thus, we might suppose that Hagar's pride is something like Eve's and that it is seen by the author as reprehensible, the cause of her fall from the garden. Yet here we falter. In the realistic foreground we feel that Hagar's pride is not merely her downfall, but also her salvation — and we may question what sense to make of that within the religious context. Our difficulty is compounded by Hagar's refusal to capitulate finally to that insistent religious dimension. While she does clearly make certain accommodations, it is equally apparent that Hagar approaches her death still in the spirit of those lines from Dylan Thomas which Laurence employs as epigraph: "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

The difficulty which has been described here comes from our expectation that background and foreground should cohere, and perhaps from an assumption that any extensive use of the Bible and sacraments will very probably signal belief. Some of this difficulty can be resolved if we approach *The Stone Angel* from a feminist perspective. If we consider the role of Christianity in Hagar's life as a woman, we may find another justification for the weight which is given to Christianity in this novel and a partial explanation for Hagar's resistance to it. We will also discover another significant area of backgrounding, an area of femi-

nist concern which explains or corrects our vision of the foreground in which a woman is chastised for her mistreatment of men. These various backgrounds — the past time of the novel, the religious and feminist dimensions — must be considered together if we are to understand *The Stone Angel* as a whole. They cohere as an historical explanation of how Hagar came to be the woman she is at the point of death.

The feminist dimension of *The Stone Angel* can be described as a kind of backgrounding because there is almost no overt consideration of these themes, and because the foreground may seem to be occupied with antithetical ideas. If Hagar is Everywoman, she is apparently a woman on trial for her crimes against men. Indeed, Hagar sees in the woods of Shadow Point the imaginary props and players for a jury trial in which she will summarily be found guilty; her sense of guilt is also indicated when she finds an old scale with its weights missing. But if the trial were a fair one and her attorney as eloquent as Margaret Laurence, there is little question that Hagar would be let off on compassionate grounds. *The Stone Angel* is told in the first person, by Hagar Shipley — so that Laurence must do all her pleading behind the scenes. In that background she prepares a devastating brief, a full-scale feminist analysis which operates as counter-weight to the crime of pride. While she admits Hagar's share of responsibility, Laurence also cites patriarchal society as a kind of instigating culprit; and she argues that men and women alike have been injured by the forces which lead to Hagar's intractable, compensatory pride. The novel avoids polemic by this fortunate circumstance, that Hagar cannot herself articulate (because historically she does not know) the feminist view of her case. Thus, Laurence is compelled to embody these ideas rather than to discuss them, and she does so ultimately in defence of her heroine.

Hagar is consistently identified with the stone angel which is the central image of the novel, indicative obviously of her pride and blindness. But the angel is in fact a monument to Hagar's mother, "who relinquished her feeble ghost as [Hagar] gained [her] stubborn one." The association between angel and mother will require our careful attention, for it is obscured by Jason Currie's evident lack of interest in his dead wife and by our knowledge that the stone angel is essentially a monument to his own pride. Indeed, so thoroughly has she been obliterated that even her name is missing from the text. Hagar has supplanted her mother, rejected her image, and chosen instead to mirror her father's pride. But in the shadow of that stone angel which she becomes is another angel, ministering and mild — the kind of woman we take her mother to have been.

This stone angel is an imported creature, not anything original to the Canadian soil. The would-be pharaoh Jason Currie has purchased it from Italy, presumably because he thinks he can establish his pre-eminence in Manawaka only through an image crafted abroad. Clearly his is the colonial sensibility which looks to the old world for its values and for a continuation of class privilege. By

the time Hagar is an old woman, Jason's pretensions (like those of Ozymandias) will have turned to dust: the Currie-Shipley stone will be recognized by a new generation as simply Canadian, marking the graves of two pioneering families with little to choose between them. The angel itself is "askew and tilted"; and even marble does not last forever — as we know from the description of Hagar's aged skin: "too white . . . too dry, powdery as blown dust when the rains failed, flaking with dryness as an old bone will flake and chalk, left out in a sun that grinds bone and flesh and earth to dust as though in a mortar of fire with a pestle of crushing light." In the light of truth, which is partly the recognition of our common mortality, the proud marble angel will finally be dissolved. But there is another angel which also must be laid to rest. And that is the image which Jason Currie seems to have imported from Britain: the Victorian image of woman as "The Angel in the House," a seminal conception of the Victorian era which is celebrated in Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name. This angel is soft, but it is ironically as rigid in conception as the marble image which Jason Currie erects over the corpse of a wife driven to an early grave — a woman puzzled, we may suppose, that her accommodation to the feminine ideal has served her no better than this. The stone angel in this sense expresses Jason Currie's privilege as a *man*, as well as the privilege he enjoys as a man of substance. Jason had little use for women, and little reverence for those feminine virtues which inspired men like John Ruskin or Coventry Patmore to such absurd heights of idolatry; but he shared their more significant belief in male superiority, and he accepted their notions of what behaviour and what education were appropriate for a lady.

Hagar very naturally wishes to exhibit whatever qualities are consistent with her pride and are admired by others. Her nearest judge is Jason, who encourages the male virtues in her and neglects certain of the feminine virtues which he will expect her eventually to display. Proud of her refusal to cry in the scene where he beats her with a ruler, Jason remarks that she has a "backbone" and takes after him. He is proud also of her intelligence, but wishes it had been granted to his sons instead. So Hagar is courageous, proud, brainy — everything that her father admires; and she is also female, so that these virtues are perceived as useless. Moreover, they prevent the subservience which Jason ultimately expects of her. The tender virtues are not developed in Hagar: she perceives them only as weakness, a malleability which is unacceptable to her sense of self. She repudiates the silliness of other girls, dislikes anything flimsy or gutless. Only when she becomes aware of the standard which holds Lottie Drieser's china doll prettiness superior to her own strong-boned handsomeness does Hagar begin to share her father's view that a genetic irony has transpired in the Currie family: *she* should have inherited her mother's "daintiness," and the "graceful unspirited boys" should have had their father's ox-like strength. Symbolically, however, Hagar's

backbone and other insistent bones preserve her from the repulsive formlessness which is stereotypically assigned to women, even as they condemn her in another sense to the rigidity of a stone angel.

In particular, Hagar loathes the vulnerability which she associates with the image of her mother, and which she perceives is equally despised by her father. Jason Currie would occasionally squeeze out a tear at the thought of his late wife, for the edification of "the matrons of the town, who found a tear for the female dead a reassuring tribute to thankless motherhood." Margaret Laurence reminds us here of the perils which attended childbirth in the days before antibiotics, and which required that women be rather forcibly locked into a notion of themselves as mothers to the race. Hagar has no wish to be a martyr; thus she approaches the birth of her first son reluctantly, convinced it will be the death of her. Often in the novel, images of the birth process seem repulsive — as when Hagar observes the "mammoth matriarchal fly . . . labouring obscenely to squeeze out of herself her white and clustered eggs." As a child Hagar refuses to be lulled by her father's crocodile tears; she knows that her mother was "the brood mare who lay beneath [the monument] because she'd proved no match for his stud." So Jason Currie pays his token dues to womankind in pretending to honour his wife for her status as victim, but Hagar — instead of feeling compassion or anger on her mother's behalf — merely shares in his contempt for the biological slavery of women.

Jason's wife, in the daguerreotype which Hagar keeps of her, is "a spindly and anxious girl . . . [who] peers perplexed out of her little frame, wondering how on earth to please." That little frame is, of course, the straitjacket which Hagar wishes to avoid in her own life. It requires of women that they live to please others, and it is clearly pernicious. But Hagar reacts too extremely, becoming hidebound in pride — so that only at the point of death can she engage in "truly free" acts of maternal tenderness. The first of these, involving the pursuit of a bedpan for her young room-mate in the hospital, is possible only because Hagar has been liberated from an actual straitjacket. The second of her free acts also signifies a release from constriction and a motherly reaching out to others, as Hagar breaks the death hold of her wrestling match with Marvin (in the role of Jacob) to give her son the angel's blessing. Although she does not remember her mother in these last hours of life, Hagar as she approaches her own grave has achieved something like a reconciliation with that other angel. So it is that Hagar's last thought, as she holds the glass of water triumphantly in her own hands, taking what is there to be had, is "There. There." These are the mother words, which she has failed to supply for others in their deepest need — and which should have been as free as water. At least three times before in the novel these words have appeared, once when she thought but could not say them to Bram, once when she was trying to calm herself into remembering the name of

Shadow Point, and once when she congratulated herself for standing upright in the woods: "There. There." Motherless, Hagar has for nearly all her life been unable to give a mother's love and consolation to the people who needed her. In these last words, she appears as mother to herself: it is a beautiful resolution of her independence and her need.

AS THE WOMAN WHO WAS NOT THERE, Hagar's mother figures powerfully also in the lives of her two sons. Their sexual identity is uncertain. Dan is described in terms which may suggest effeminacy, and Matt is childless for reasons which are bitterly apparent to his wife (the suggestion is that they did not make love, or not often). Although either or both of the brothers might be considered homosexual, Laurence does not give us enough information to conclude that — nor does it matter in the least. What does matter is that the Currie brothers have been made deeply miserable in two ways: they have not been allowed to experience or to express feminine tenderness, and they have failed to achieve an imposed standard of masculinity. These sons are a considerable disappointment to Jason Currie, whose expectations about what a man ought to be and what a woman ought to be have damaged the lives of all his children.

The extent of that psychological damage to his sons is indicated symbolically in their early deaths. Particularly in Matt's case, death seems a release from an impossibly blighted existence; Dan presumably escaped before the bars of his cage were altogether apparent to him. At the moment of Dan's death we see clearly what has been missing from their lives: Matt wraps around himself the plaid shawl of their mother, and so becomes her in order to console Dan. We realize in this poignant tableau that both boys have been sorely deprived by their mother's death, occasioned by the birth of Hagar — and that this is one reason for their resentment of Hagar. But that feeling might have been avoided if Hagar had supplied anything of the mother's tenderness which they missed on her account, or if their father had done so. At it happens, Jason Currie prefers his daughter. Thus it would seem to the boys that Hagar has deprived them of both parents, and they express their resentment by taking a switch to Hagar whenever their father has beaten them. The harshness of the father is in this way communicated to the surviving female, who has refused to embody the gentleness of their mother.

The plaid shawl is first offered to Hagar, who refuses to wear it despite Matt's pleading. It is easier for Matt, a boy, to assume this maternal guise than it is for Hagar — who is unwilling to relinquish even for this occasion her own identity, and particularly unwilling to associate herself with what she takes to be the

mother's frailty. When Hagar marries, Matt thinks of sending her the shawl as a wedding gift, either to mock her lack of womanliness, or to invest her with those qualities which the shawl represents and which she will need as wife and mother. For whatever reason, Matt changes his mind. And Hagar goes into marriage without the talismanic shawl, unable still to express the tenderness she mistakes for weakness. Repeatedly we see Hagar on the point of relenting, of acknowledging despised feminine sentiments in herself — feelings which *are* there, and which are needed badly; repeatedly, she retreats into that pride which is based on her rejection of the mother image.

Another face of the angel is mistaken as belonging solely to the stone angel of her father's pride, and this is the image of herself as lady which she embraces gladly. What she forgets is that a lady is first of all a woman. Essentially, Hagar falls victim to the lure which is held out by John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies*: much as Jason Currie would produce a tear in payment to thankless motherhood, so Ruskin sugar-coats the pill of servitude to men by describing woman as queen of her own household. Ruskin appeals covertly to a sense of class in his audience, an eminence which women achieve through the standing of their fathers and husbands. In this way women are to be compensated for the inferior position they hold in relation to men; with this pride of class in their hearts, women who were less than wholly convinced by Ruskin's arguments about a woman's special powers (of gentleness, piety, and so on) might still be reconciled to the subservience which is in fact allocated to them as a sex. We may suppose that some women were so daunted by male authority that they neglected to take refuge in this bounty of Ruskin's; thus, Hagar's mother in the daguerreotype "looks so worried that she will not know what to do, although she came of good family and ought not to have had a moment's hesitation about the propriety of her ways." Hagar would not be so intimidated, but it takes her some time to realize that behind the lady she becomes is a woman in harness.

As her mother was a brood mare, so Hagar when she is sent by Jason to the young ladies' academy in Toronto is described as "the dark-maned colt off to the training ring." Jason *wants* the angel of his house to be proud, requires her social arrogance as an extension of his own — although he naturally expects obedience within doors. It was his wife's failure to embody both halves of this paradoxical ideal which made him feel that her death for Hagar's life was "a fair exchange." He would rather have a thoroughbred who acts like one, so long as he can keep possession of the reins. Hagar is sent east because "there's no woman here to teach you how to dress and behave like a lady," and she returns two years later to confront her father's evaluation of the expense. Always the canny Scots merchant, Jason examines his daughter's lady-like attire and nods approval, "as though I were a thing and his." Hagar does rebel momentarily when she discovers her father's opposition to her plan to become a teacher, but she yields and

walks upstairs to begin her duties as Jason's chatelaine. She pauses there on the landing to stare rather enigmatically at an engraving of cattle. Hagar is on her way to discovering that the distance from chatelaine to chattel, from dark-maned colt to brood mare to cow, is not so very impressive after all.

Hagar's education has been as close as possible to that of a Victorian young lady: "I know embroidery, and French, and menu-planning for a five-course meal, and poetry, and how to take a firm hand with servants, and the most becoming way of dressing my hair." Thus superfluously equipped, she returns to grace Jason's transplanted haven of Victoriana, his "square brick palace so oddly antimacassared in the wilderness." Like certain of his brother merchants abroad, Jason requires such aristocratic trappings in his chatelaine as proof to the world (in this case, Manawaka) that he is a rising man. Very little of what Hagar learns in Toronto would have served her in a career as a teacher, still less in the life she chooses after three years as Jason's hostess. In each instance, we see the irrelevance of imported concepts of gentility to life on the Canadian prairie. We see also that an education which aims at making woman decorative will keep her dependent upon men. Later Hagar will envy young women like the nurse who have been better equipped for autonomous survival.

When Hagar has had enough of her father's rule, she marries Bram Shipley — because he offers an opportunity for rebellion, and because she is attracted to him physically. Since the erotic component in the masculine image has been carefully obscured in Jason Currie's household, Hagar's response to this in Bram is rebellious; but since Jason's own stereotypical view of masculinity has been communicated to Hagar, he is peculiarly responsible for the fact that she prefers Bram with his exaggerated masculinity to "the pliable boys of good family whom [Jason] trotted home" for Hagar's inspection. Mare-like and malleable, they must have seemed like women to her — and singularly unappetizing, as most things female are to Hagar. There ought to have been other alternatives, but Hagar has reached the point where it is necessary for her to leave Jason: the harness is chafing beyond endurance. Bram looks like freedom because he would look so unsatisfactory to her father. But again, her rebellion is not so thorough as she supposes, for Hagar intends to reform Bram into something more like what her father has in mind. Thus, she luxuriates in his savagery — "he looked like a bearded Indian" — and in the next instant imagines him "rigged out in a suit of gray soft as a dove's breast feathers." Her laundered, fairy tale vision of the life she would lead with Bram is similarly inspired by the poetry she has read in Toronto, so that Bram is cast in her imagination as the primitive who would miraculously prove to be a gentleman. The lady is still in harness, blind to the rough plebeian life outside her sphere.

Then Hagar marries and the veil is lifted. She finds that one of the identities envisioned for her husband is impossible: Bram Shipley is obviously not going to

improve his grammar, or prosper, or take to wearing the clothes of a gentleman. He is not going to do any of these things because he never wanted them enough, and because the contempt which his new wife shows for what he is makes him resist any of her efforts to remodel him. Yet Bram had been attracted to Hagar largely because of her lady-like ways; like the Victorian male, he aimed at procuring an angel for his house — some gentle female refinement as a compensation for the roughness which the male endures in his role as provider. Bram's roughness is more literal, his provision scantier by far — but he is not so different from Jason as Hagar thinks. Thus, he gives her the elegant decanter as a wedding gift, and so like Jason he wants sons (not daughters) to create a dynasty. Hagar's response to this ambition in Bram is "*the nerve of him,*" anger both at his absurd social presumption and at this new proof of masculine arrogance. Bram could not have supposed that the angel would find his manner so disgusting, or that her pride of class (based irrevocably on her father rather than on him) would so thoroughly obstruct her wifely subservience and love. Bram's genteel ambitions (never very strong) wither in the stone angel's gaze. But there is another Bram, corresponding to Hagar's more genuinely rebellious image of the man she married — and this is the sexual, laughing Bram, the one who seemed to promise joy.

WE COME NOW TO ONE of the most insistent themes of the novel. Hagar is unable to let Bram know the satisfaction she feels in their love-making; her pride as a lady forbids any admission of that kind, so that ironically she cannot profit fully from her choice of a virile man. Immediately following her memory of this forced coldness in Bram's bed, Hagar is seen as an old woman lying flat on her back and "cold as winter" in another bed, remembering how children lie down in snow to make "the outline of an angel with spread wings." Significantly crafted in childhood, this snow angel recalls obviously the whiteness and chill of marble as well as the chastity of the Victorian angel. The root cause of Hagar's dilemma is religion, by way of Jason — for her father's dour Presbyterianism holds that sexuality is evil. Accordingly, his affair with "No-Name Lottie Drieser's mother" is perceived as dirty, something to be concealed from decent folk. Jason's partner in crime is a Victorian stereotype, abused and dwelling in shadows: "her face soft and blank as though she expected nothing out of life . . . she began to trudge up the hill." Because women like this exist, others may remain pure . . . so absurdly pure in fact, that Hagar is condemned to enter marriage with absolutely no information about what will happen on her wedding night. The sum of Jason's teaching is that "'Men have terrible thoughts,'" a notion which explains in part (for there are also economic motives) the Victo-

rian allocation of chastity to women: as angels they must compensate for the bestiality of men, keeping humanity as far as possible out of Satan's grasp. Particularly was the lady to be unimpassioned, while women of a lower order (harlots and half-breeds) might be lascivious in the service of any man who chose to risk perdition. Hagar is not devout, but she is Presbyterian and Victorian enough to associate sex with stable beasts and the lower classes, with men who cannot help themselves, and with ladies least of all. In this way is her body victimized — not that she must endure her husband's embrace, but that she may not labour in love for their mutual satisfaction. She is paid for her sacrifice in being known as a lady. Again and again. Hagar relinquishes her claim to a full humanity — always in order that she may remain a lady, always failing to perceive that this apparent superiority is a ruse.

Hagar's exposure to genteel poetry and art have also contributed to her view of love as asexual: "Love, I fancied, must consist of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets, not like things he did sprawled on the high white bedstead that rattled like a train." Bram has proven more rough Indian than Hagar had any reason to suspect. She brings to his house a print by Holman Hunt which she had acquired in the East (always the avenue for Victoriana): "I did so much admire the knight and lady's swooning adoration, until one day I saw the coyness of the pair, playing at passion, and in a fury I dropped the picture, gilt frame and all, into the slough, feeling it had betrayed me." Significantly, this picture is juxtaposed against another of horses — which Bram dislikes, despite his passion for horses, because he is annoyed that Hagar prefers the picture of the thing to the reality. The horses here (recalling Jason as stud to his wife's broodmare) obviously signify the truth of sexuality, in contrast to the myth which is perpetrated in Holman Hunt's picture. But Hagar knows that she has been betrayed, is angered not by the harsh reality of love so much as by the fact that lies such as these pale images of Holman Hunt have cut her off from authentic passion.

Hagar enters in her marriage to Bram a new kind of subjugation. She has escaped the destiny of Victorian females who sacrifice everything to their parents, a fate like that of the poor Manawaka spinster whose tomb inscription reads: "*Rest in peace. From toil, surcease. Regina Weese.*" But sexual experience is not liberating for her, and the work she must perform for a houseful of men is still drudgery. That ox-like strength she would once have exchanged for daintiness takes her through twenty-four years of hard labour in which she becomes increasingly like Bram's first wife. Clara Shipley, "inarticulate as a stabled beast," was fat, her voice gruff as a man's; likewise, Hagar gains bulk (for lack, she believes, of a proper lady's corset) and wears a man's overcoat without remembering to object. But internally she remains Hagar Currie. She is contemptuous of Bram's daughters by Clara, coarse women who cannot in any way transcend their condition. At the same time, she is reduced in the fashion of all such farm wives to

cheating her husband on the egg money and never questions that what little Bram's farm makes is not his own entirely. She is Hagar the Egyptian bond-woman of *Genesis*, no happier in her servitude than was that other Hagar. Always she rejects the satisfactions of martyrdom, the support which Clara Shipley received from what Hagar calls her "morbid motto": "*No Cross No Crown.*" Even as an old woman, Hagar will recoil from the martyrish attitudes of her daughter-in-law, despising that slavish Christianity which looks for its reward in another world. Hagar is too proud to grovel for profit, and we may honour her for that — even as we deplore her failure to appreciate the labours of Doris, and of those other women with whom she denied kinship.

Finally, Hagar decides to leave Bram. The offence of her pride has become unendurable, and she is anxious to provide another sort of environment for John, the favoured son in whom she believes the Currie heritage will flower. Ironically, she must become a servant in earnest — a woman in uniform, no longer veiled as daughter or wife — in order to earn money and to live in the sort of house she thinks is appropriate for a Currie. Also ironically, her new position echoes that of Auntie Doll, housekeeper to the Curries, in relation to whom Hagar had supposed herself "quite different . . . a different sort entirely." That she has gone from bad to worse is suggested by the peculiarly unsavoury manner in which Mr. Oatley, her employer, has made his fortune: he has shipped Oriental wives into Canada, allowing them to plummet through the false bottom of the vessel whenever Immigration became suspicious. This grisly practice obtrudes oddly in the book, until we realize that it announces the author's concern with the wrongs which have been perpetrated against women by male society.

In a male fortress, then, a house founded on the death of women, Hagar lives quietly with John and at night (but only then) yearns for the body of her husband. She has resumed a version of the place she held in Jason Currie's house, and in her retreat to such spurious prestige has re-created for John the prison of her own childhood. John is deprived of Bram, as the Currie brothers were deprived of their father's love; and he is raised to hold himself aloof in pride, in circumstances which reveal the foolishness of pride. When the Depression strikes and his prospects are reduced to zero, John returns to Manawaka. There he presides over the death of Bram, caring for him as Matt had for Dan — again as a substitute for Hagar, who comes finally but is not recognized. This is a kind of retribution for her unwillingness at Dan's death to bend and assume another's role: now Bram, the one person who called her Hagar, mistakes her for "his fat and cow-like first wife," Clara.

During this and a subsequent visit to Manawaka, Hagar observes the love which is growing up between John and Arlene Simmons, who is Lottie Drieser's daughter. Arlene's position in Manawaka society is superior to John's, a neat reversal of the time when Hagar could hold herself superior to Lottie. Thus, John

thinks at first that he is Bram-like for Arlene, illicit and therefore attractive as an opportunity for rebellion. But Arlene is free of such considerations. She has abandoned the sense of class superiority and with it the sense of sex as something a woman cannot enjoy without demeaning herself. She loves John and is capable of redeeming him for a life of joy — not of changing him exactly, as Hagar (thinking of Bram) warns her that she cannot, but of being open to him in such a way that John will change and grow of his own volition. That “stiff black seed on the page” of her *Sweet Pea Reader*, at which Hagar had stared as a child, hoping it would “swell and blossom into something different, something rare,” shows signs of doing just that in the relationship of Arlene and Hagar’s son. Seeing how freely Arlene can show her passion to John, Hagar finds it “incredible that such a spate of unapologetic life should flourish in this mean and crabbed world” — incredible perhaps, but for an instant she believes in this new, miraculous life for men and women.

Then she conspires with Lottie to separate their children, symbolically to stamp out their life, just as once before she stood by as Lottie trampled on the chicks emerging from their shells; in both cases death is accomplished presumably for the good of its victims. In the same punishing spirit, Jason Currie had claimed that he beat his daughter for her own good; thus he forbade her marriage to Bram. In fact his motive was self-interested, and the motive is what counts. Hagar, in need of water (her well in the wilderness) at Shadow Point, will quote Coleridge and ask “What albatross did I slay, for mercy’s sake?” She will wound a gull (the spirit of love) and think “I’d gladly kill it, but I can’t bring myself to go near enough.” The significance of this seems to be that Hagar’s fastidious pride keeps her from an act of mercy, as it had when she refused to wear the plaid shawl to ease Dan’s death. In causing the separation of John and Arlene, however, their mothers do not kill “for mercy’s sake,” but for their own. John (whose mother will not allow him independent life) regresses to the recklessness of an embittered child and kills both himself and Arlene in a car crash. Their life is coolly stamped out. And Hagar’s albatross, the guilt she feels for John’s death, will be appeased only when Hagar in the role of the ancient mariner can look into her heart and admit the failure of love.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING John’s death are repressed by Hagar (and kept from the reader) until the turning and gathering point of the novel, which occurs at Shadow Point. Hagar has run away from her house in Vancouver because Marvin and Doris intend to put her in the nursing home which Hagar the Egyptian thinks of as “a mausoleum”: she is running still from incarceration, from any imposed image of herself as feeble or subject to

another's will. Twice before Hagar had fled — from her father's mausoleum to Bram's house, and from there to Mr. Oatley's death-like mansion in Vancouver. Her destination now repeats the flight to Bram's house. The abandoned house in which she first seeks shelter is unpainted, as the Shipley place had been; but now Hagar takes satisfaction in its weathered state, thinking how Marvin (the proper son, who sells house paint) would disapprove as once she relished Jason Currie's disapproval. Her second shelter, the cannery, with its "rusted and unrecognizable machinery" and the "skeleton" of a fishboat, also recalls the Shipley place, where "rusty machinery stood like aged bodies gradually expiring from exposure, ribs turned to the sun." These connections are important, because at Shadow Point Hagar will confront the deaths associated with the drought-plagued Shipley place — Bram's death, and finally John's. Hagar, we may remember, is herself a figure of the drought: her aged skin is "powdery as blown dust when the rains failed . . . left out in a sun that grinds bone and flesh and earth to dust as though in a mortar of fire with a pestle of light." But she will also, when she has suffered enough of such fiery enlightenment, be granted the mercy of water before her own death comes in fact.

Significantly, she must descend a stairway to arrive at the place where her genuine freedom will begin. There may be echoes here of that staircase she climbed up in Jason's house to begin her tenure as his chatelaine. Now, as the stone angel topples, as a lady would come down from her pedestal, so Hagar laboriously descends the half-rotted steps which lead to the beach. "It's not a proper stairway, actually" — it is returning to its natural condition, just as Hagar, "feeling slightly dizzy," abandons propriety to enter the depths of her own nature. On the way down these steps she feels the "goatsbeard brush satyr-like" against her — as Bram had done when they met; and she sees a kind of wildflower called the Star of Bethlehem, which (together with the Pan images) implies the spiritual rebirth which is waiting for her at Shadow Point. She delights in thinking of herself as Meg Merrilies, from the poem by Keats — an old gypsy woman (common, by the world's reckoning) whose house was "out of doors," whose "book" (like Hagar's) was "a churchyard tomb." It is as Meg *Merrilies* that she will encounter *Murray Lees*, her spiritual double, and drink the wine which is referred to in Keats' poem. They will exhibit toward one another something of that ease-giving generosity which is also contained in the poem: "She plaited mats o' rushes, / And gave them to the cottagers / She met among the bushes." Old Meg is compassionate; she sings and decks her hair with garlands (as Hagar does with June bugs); she rejoices in nature; and she dies. The model of womanhood she offers to Hagar on the eve of her own death is also one of independence and of undiminished pride: "Old Meg was brave as Margaret Queen / And tall as Amazon." This is the resolution of compassion and pride which Hagar seeks.

On the beach, Hagar sees a small boy and girl playing house. These children are later compared to John and Arlene, and there is also a connection with Hagar and Murray Lees, who take up residence together in the cannery. The girl is nagging at the boy, fussing about appearances; and Hagar wants to warn her that she will lose him if she continues to be so critical, so niggardly of praise. Again, the drought metaphor is employed: "*The branches will wither, the roots they will die, / You'll be all forsaken and you'll never know why.*" When she intervenes, however, the children cling to one another — and this show of unity makes Hagar think that she has underestimated them, as clearly she does in the case of John and Arlene. Rather strangely, Hagar has claimed that she was herself forsaken: "I never left them. It was the other way around, I swear it." In any case, she is at last beginning to know why. She acknowledges here that love is the water required for growth, and that false pride can kill as surely as the drought. When love fails, each partner is forsaken; both lose, and blame is not the crucial issue.

The turning point comes with the arrival of Murray F. Lees. Almost her first remark to him is "I hope you'll excuse my appearance," but soon Hagar relaxes enough to share his wine and listen to his tale. What she hears is essentially her own story: a tale in which religion plays an important role, where the chief villains are a concern for appearances and the denial of sexuality, and where the catastrophe involves the loss of a son. Murray's story is about two women, his mother and his wife. Rose Ferney was his mother's name, "A delicate name, she used to say," but Rose was in fact as tough as a morning glory vine. Ironically, Hagar fails to see herself in Rose: "'Fancy spending your life worrying what people were thinking. She must have had a rather weak character.'" The point, of course, is that the proverbial clinging vine takes many forms, both strong and weak; the frailty of women can be deceptive (as in the case of Rose or Lottie), and the tenacity which is shown in an obsessive regard for appearances is also weakness.

Murray's grandfather was a circuit rider, an evangelist who greatly embarrassed his Anglican daughter-in-law; yet Murray preferred "hellfire to [his mother's] lavender talcum," and became himself a Redeemer's Advocate. The passion of that sect became still more attractive when he met Lou at Bible Camp, for here it seemed was a religion in which "prayer and *that*" were not the "odd combination" which Hagar thinks they are. Then Lou got pregnant and began to worry (as Murray's mother always had) about her reputation. They married, but her concern grew with the arrival of a child too big to be premature — and her heart went out of sex. She thought that God was punishing her, and her religion became (like Jason's Presbyterianism) a denial of the flesh. But the real punishment came for Lou and Murray, as it had for Hagar, in the *death* of their son — and not his birth, which was the fruit of love. Thus, the child is

killed in a fire while Lou is in the tabernacle with Murray, " 'begging for the keys of heaven.' " They are punished symbolically, as Hagar is throughout her life and especially in John's death, for the denial of sexuality which Laurence opposes so vehemently in this novel. In Lou's original sensuality and its demise, we see clearly what Laurence believes has been done to women in the name of religion and propriety; in Murray's deprivation at the change in his wife, we see how this process has worked also to the disadvantage of the male.

Hagar does not come to any conscious realization of her error in listening to Murray's story. But it works on her subconsciously, as in a sort of dream she admits the guilt which is parallel to Murray's, and he assumes the role of John in order to forgive her. She also exhibits forgiveness toward Murray, first in trying to assuage his guilt over the fire, and second in pardoning him for the broken promise which brings Marvin and Doris to the cannery. Strictly speaking, Hagar is wrong when she tells Murray that " 'No one's to blame' " for his son's death. Yet there are times when compassion requires us to act and speak not strictly in accordance with some ideal of truth, but with a clear sense of the other's plight. That same generosity in which Hagar has failed so often, and which she is learning with such difficulty now, must in the end be applied to her. We judge her less harshly than we might because we acknowledge the power of those forces which have worked against her. At the same time, we admire Hagar's pride precisely because it is a form (however twisted) of resistance to those forces — a statement, in fact, that Hagar Shipley is her own woman. She will not beg at heaven's gate, or cite excuses; if there is a God, he must take her as we do — for better or worse.

With the arrival of Marvin and Doris at the cannery, we learn that Hagar is dying. She is taken to a hospital, where her pride seems to be thriving still as she insists that Marvin get her a private room. A ward full of helpless women, where you sleep "as you would in a barracks or a potter's field, cheek-by-jowl with heaven knows who all," is not the place for Hagar. Although she has just been comforted by a night in the proximity of Murray Lees, "Nothing is ever changed at a single stroke." In fact, the ward is exactly what Hagar needs, and she is kept there long enough to make friends with Elva Jardine, a common *woman* — as if to repeat in another key her experience of comradeship with Murray Lees. It is at this point in the novel that the theme of sisterhood becomes apparent. After a lifetime of despising women, Hagar is at last compelled to join the ranks of her own sex. Her democratization (the lessening of class pride) takes the form of a movement toward her fellow women in order to suggest that Hagar has turned to pride of class partly as an escape from the humiliations of her sex.

Elva Jardine recalls Mrs. Steiner, the woman at Silverthreads Nursing Home who had seemed briefly to hold out the promise of friendship for Hagar. It was she who spoke of the comfort to be had from daughters (a point also made by

Lottie), and who articulated Hagar's own astonishment at the way a woman's body can travel from puberty through childbirth to menopause with such harrowing speed that the *mind* seems left behind at every stage, aghast and wondering. Hagar liked Mrs. Steiner immediately, but saw her as a trap designed to make Silverthreads and resignation seem attractive. She ran from that "oriental shrug" which accompanied Mrs. Steiner's ironic question: "Where will you go? You got someplace to go?" Having run from "oriental" (or submissive) womanhood as far as she was able, Hagar at last can run no more; the body is insistent, and now what it insists upon is death. Thus, she confronts her *human* fate simultaneously with her identity as woman, which she recognizes through Elva and other women in the hospital. It is important for Laurence that Hagar should make this connection before she dies.

Hagar doesn't like Elva immediately, for her pride interferes, and she recoils as usual from the sort of woman who seems "flimsy as moth wings." But Elva is tough in spirit, as well as compassionate toward other women and tender in the love she exhibits toward her husband. All of this is a lesson for Hagar, one that strikes to her roots because Elva (by a fortunate coincidence) is from Manawaka. Thus, Hagar can return in imagination to claim Bram instead of Jason (whom she might have used to impress Elva) and to admit through Elva her kinship with those common women of Manawaka she had once denied. Like Mrs. Steiner, Elva Jardine faces her own imminent death as a woman and with courage, revealing to Hagar that the two are not at odds. And she offers another lesson in the way she handles the indignities of bowel and bladder which have been so oppressive to Hagar in her infirmity. She struggles to the bathroom on her "'own two pins,'" but will accept help when she needs it — as well as *offer* help, in the shape of a bedpan for Mrs. Dobereiner. Hagar proves that she has learned what Elva has to teach when (valiantly, but with an appreciation of absurdity) she gets the bedpan for Sandra Wong, her final room-mate. Those bedsheets which Doris washed so frequently, without complaining to Hagar until the end, are recalled by these events — so that we have a sense of many women joining together to admit the realities of the body, and to deal with the indignities that oppose them.

In Sandra Wong, Hagar confronts the changes which have occurred in women's lives. Laurence makes her Chinese so that Hagar can imagine her as "the granddaughter of one of the small foot-bound women whom Mr. Oatley smuggled in, when Oriental wives were frowned upon." But Sandra "speaks just like Tina," Hagar's own liberated granddaughter — which places Hagar squarely in that generation of women whose feet were bound. The corset of a lady was more appealing to Hagar, and would seem more natural; but it is not dissimilar in function, as both forms of binding work to restrict the movements of women and reduce their size. And all of this occurs for the delectation of the male, whose

vanity is flattered by an implicit comparison to his own superior mobility and stature, while ironically the vanity of woman is provoked to make her collaborate in the process of diminution. In effect, woman turns to self-love in order to avoid self-hatred; she defeats herself in order to save herself when she embraces pride of class or personal vanity as her defence. This image of constriction (the foot-binding) connects with that straitjacket of pride from which Hagar must be released in order to get the bedpan for Sandra and to bless Marvin — her two “truly free” acts — and so reveals the deep interpenetration of these themes in the novel. Hagar’s own complicity is further implied when she thinks, “Maybe I owe my house to her grandmother’s passage money. There’s a thought.” She does not pursue that thought, but we may — and we realize that Hagar’s mistake has been to join forces with the oppressor (all that Jason Currie has represented in the way of patriarchal, Victorian arrogance), and that she has done so for her own profit, although that profit has been illusory. In fact, she has been deformed as badly as those other women from whom she had hoped to dissociate herself. As their feet were crippled, so in her compensatory pride Hagar has been kept from the natural, healthy development of feeling which was her birthright as a woman and as a human being.

Hagar welcomes the changes which have come about for women, that the young nurse has training which allows her independence and that Sandra Wong can refer knowledgeably to hysterectomies, but she knows that nothing changes all at once: “The plagues go on from generation to generation.” With Tina, however, it seems that progress has been made, for contrary to her grandmother’s expectation, Tina has found “a man who’ll bear her independence,” and Hagar sends her a sapphire ring as a wedding present. With this ring, the novel comes a full circle. It had belonged to Hagar’s despised mother, and should have gone (as Hagar tells Doris in a gesture of reconciliation) to her despised daughter-in-law first of all. It might also have gone to Arlene, of course, if Hagar had possessed the wisdom then that she shows now in sending the ring to Tina. Hagar does not envision here a future for women without men, but a situation in which both men and women will be free to love one another and to respect each other’s needs. She cannot undo the past. She will not deny the person she has been. But in the act of ring-giving, Hagar succeeds in linking four generations of women with some faith that whatever plagues continue, of pride or other oppression, there will also be increasing joy.

