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THE THEME OF FREEDOM AND SURVIVAL IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S  
*THE STONE ANGEL*

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ABSTRACT

Canadian literature is an extensive field which has created a lot of memorable works of literature. Even though Canadian literature began as an extension of colonial literature, in course of time it has developed its own national characteristics. Early Canadian literature was heavily influenced by the traditions of the mother countries. However, by the early twentieth century writers began to discover their distinctly Canadian voices and expressed them through their writings.

The Canadian literature was mainly influenced by the landscape. The main themes of early literature were the fights of the native to cope up with the Canadian environment and his fight for survival. Later novels concentrated on the theme of the conflict between urban culture and rural culture. Canadian writers have focused on the effects of colonialism on the native people. As a result, themes such as freedom, survival, search for self-identity, ancestry, home, colonization, isolation etc are treated earnestly by the Canadian writers as these themes form the inevitable part of Canadian identity. Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* is a typical Canadian novel which emphasizes the themes of freedom and survival at its best. The Canadian experience of alienation, freedom, survival and subjectivity has been treated well in the novel.

Key Words: Canadian identity, freedom, survival, isolation

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Margaret Laurence is one of the famous women writers of Canada. She is often considered as the writer of feminine sensibility. Her works are nourished by Canadian culture and life style. She was also a founder of the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community. Laurence began her literary career by writing short stories. Later she concentrated in writing novels. *The Stone Angel*, the book for which she is best known is set in a fictional small town called Manawaka. The novel is narrated retrospectively by Hagar Shipley, a ninety-year-old woman living in her eldest son's home in

Vancouver. It is published in 1964. The novel is of the literary form *Vollendungsroman*, that looks at the entire life of a person. It is a novel of winding down or completion. It focuses on the challenges presented in late life, chiefly to "discover the tension between affirmation and regret." (<http://en.paperblog.com/vollendungsroman-1140014/>)

*The Stone Angel* is a typical novel of Laurence which depicts her knowledge of feminine psychology and feelings. Hagar Shipley, the protagonist shows the zest for life in spite of all the problems and difficulties she face in her life. Hagar Shipley refuses to compromise with those things

which shaped the outcome of her life as well as the lives of those around her. "Pride was my wilderness and the demon that led me there was fear... [I was] never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched." (Laurence, 292). ([http:// schoolworkhelper.net/margaret-laurences-the-stone-angel - summary -analysis/](http://schoolworkhelper.net/margaret-laurences-the-stone-angel-summary-analysis/)). By pride, Hagar means a number of related qualities, such as stubbornness, rebelliousness, willfulness, and a refusal to respond naturally to her own feelings. Pride made her cover up her real emotions and reactions to people and events. She was always too concerned with what others would think. In old age she says, "What do I care now what people say? I cared too long." Hagar's pride and stubbornness were the causes of her failed relationships and lack of love in her life. She lives her life bravely and enjoys every moment of her life even if she is living in a world of alienation and loneliness. The Canadian experience of alienation, freedom, survival and subjectivity has been treated well in the novel.

The theme of freedom and survival functions as an organizing principle throughout *The Stone Angel*. The novel exposes the two character technique by juxtaposing the younger, remembered persona with the older remembering persona. In the novel, Laurence depicts the theme of survival-survival not just in the physical sense, but the survival of human dignity and human warmth. Many critics argue that the prevalent theme in *The Stone Angel* is that of pride. This theme runs predominantly throughout the novel. But when we analyze the novel, we can see that the theme of freedom and survival run parallel to the main theme. Laurence herself defines, "The major theme in *The Stone Angel*, I would say that it is in some ways, that of survival. I'm not thinking of the physical survival. I mean the survival of the spirit, with some ability to give love and receive love." ([http://www.academypublication.com / ojs/ index.php / tpls/article/](http://www.academypublication.com/ojs/index.php/tpls/article/))

The narrator of *The Stone Angel*, Hager Shipley, is characterized by her tendency to manipulate her life. The novel progresses through a number of interior monologues where no other narrating agent interferes with the thoughts of the

narrator. This technique helps in bringing out Hager's inner trauma and its outer manifestations. It also plays a major role in highlighting the theme of freedom and survival. In the novel, Hager's life is mainly divided into three phases- girlhood, youth and old age. Laurence uses unusual and complicated techniques to deal with and portray these three stages. The life of the protagonist is not presented chronologically, but through the alteration between past and present, between memory and experience. We travel with Hager's thoughts experiencing her urge for freedom and finally her acceptance of survival.

The novel's beginning as well as ending is much significant. It begins with the symbol of Stone Angel which is much symbolic of the pride of Curie family. Hagar's pride is manifested at the beginning of the novel itself. The first reference to this can be seen in the second sentence of the novel itself. Hagar describes the Stone Angel as "my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty" (*The Stone Angel* 3). But Hagar believes that the stone angel symbolizes immobility. She never wanted to be such a stone. She always wanted freedom and she is proud of her self reliant nature. She thinks "I used to pride myself on my manners" (*The Stone Angel* 98). But at the end Hagar longs for survival where she says, "I must get back to my sleek cocoon, where I'm almost comfortable." Finally Hagar recognizes that pride constitutes a vital element in her own character. She realizes this and describes herself as "rigid as marble" and also notices that the only way to find comfort in this world is the urge for survival. Hagar recognizes that the lack of freedom she bewails is caused by her inflexibility. In the end she realizes the amount of freedom she got throughout her life. Her life is characterized by many numbers of situations which clearly called for taking a decision from her own part as she says, "'I can't change what's happened to me in my life, or make what's not occurred take place. But I can't say I like it, or accept it, or believe it's for the best. I don't and never shall, not even if I'm damned for it.'"

Margaret Laurence uses another technique to reveal Hagar's unending urge for freedom, that is, by setting the events in various locations. Changes in

locations imply radical changes in her personal attitudes and disposition. It also implies chance for a new beginning and also a release from her encumbering past. Hagar's house is one of the major images integrating her thoughts and memories. Hagar's house and its contents indirectly expose her identity.

Later Hagar realizes that these places do not fulfill the promise of freedom they hold. On the contrary, the more she tries to escape from her past, the more she is caught up in it. Hagar understands freedom as a possibility of resisting her surroundings and remaining completely self-reliant. But her pride prevents her from enjoying her real freedom and her self-reliance which is vital for her survival acquires a form of rigidity in the case of Hagar.

In order to understand the theme of freedom in *The Stone Angel*, we have to associate it with the theme of death. Hagar admits the fact that the fear of death has inhibited her life from her childhood itself. The theme of death occupies a predominant place from the beginning of the novel itself. The beginning is marked by its peculiar setting, that is, in the cemetery which refers to the death of Hagar's mother, who died as a consequence of her birth. The novel demonstrates each of Hagar's steps along the difficult journey of death which is at the same time frightening and terrifying. When Hagar first faced the truth that she is getting old and not going to be around much longer, her first reaction is of denial. Hagar becomes angry with herself and with the world. She rejects everything that would shatter her belief that is strong enough to face life. She rejects others' idea that she is getting old. At one point she says, "Doris believes that age increases natural piety, like a kind of insurance policy falling due..." From Hagar's self-centered view, Marvin and Doris function as her executors, trying to deprive her identity by symbolically taking away her home. Thus in *The Stone Angel* the theme of freedom is linked with the question of human mortality.

Thus fear of death that Hagar experiences can be also viewed with respect to the cultural background in which she lived. The harsh living condition of the Canadian prairies is certainly responsible for creating such a fear. For Hagar, it is

no longer the physical aspect of survival that plausibly motivates her fear of death. It is her internal fear, which was a consequence of her socio-cultural and geographical situations. As Hagar says, "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" (*The Stone Angel* 292). The vivid portraits in time, character and place have made *The Stone Angel* an unforgettable novel. The *Stone Angel* is a story of Hagar's transformation and reconciliation.

Thus *The Stone Angel* offers a portrait of a remarkable character, Hagar Shipley who even at age ninety confronts her life and even in the middle of her personal failures she fights for survival. Laurence looks at an unlovely life built on uncompromising convictions. She explores the spiritual journey of Hagar Shipley. Different themes such as alienation, pride and ageing are handled brilliantly by Margaret Laurence. *The Stone Angel* is a memorable novel which reveals Margaret Laurence's ability of characterization and in the broadest sense, the novel is one character's search for self-identity and survival.

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