

Memory and Past in Margaret Lawrence's *The Stone Angel*

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Abstract

Margaret Laurence uses first-person narration, flashbacks, and associative memory to explore the past. *The Stone Angel* is known for its deep examination of the role and functions of memory and its processing. The captivating influence of memory renders the narration successful, emphasising certain episodes, accentuating the favourable, and obscuring the remainder. The protagonist Hagar glides between the present and the past, speaking through private recollection with objectivity. The narrative encompasses all events in the life of an ideal woman who attempts to suppress her feelings, resulting in a life marked by failure, as she refuses to acknowledge the affections of others. She falls victim to post-war Canada, adhering to emotional constraints that render her apart from her family, ultimately jeopardising her life and rejecting the affection of others. She ultimately justifies her history and somewhat acknowledges her errors. The narrator Hagar, in her recollection of the past, plainly

illustrates how she has repressed her emotions due to an emotional restraint aimed at preserving her pride. Hagar's ultimate reconciliation signifies a constructive turning point, focussing on a promising future rather than dwelling on the irretrievable past. She reflects on the lost past and ultimately resolves to relinquish concerns about bygone matters, so attaining inner peace and liberation. The readers discern Hagar's errors through the recall of the past. She uses associative memory to recall prior experiences and utilises the psychological mechanism of suppression to obscure the truth and conceal the true meaning.

Keywords: memory, past, pride, flashbacks, alienation

Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* meticulously examines the themes of memory and the past, which underpin Hagar Shipley's odyssey during her later years. Laurence explores the relationship between memory as a source of identity and a burden of regret through Hagar's recollections, crafting a narrative that illustrates how the past influences and frequently torments the present. This paper encompasses both simple and complicated narrative voices, chronological structures, and fragmented representations of the past alongside interrogative events and occurrences.

The inner consciousness is diluted through the narrative provided by the so-called instrument of memory. Narration involves the exuberant presentation of events accompanied by compelling interpretations from the outset, rendering it difficult for the reader to alter their perspective despite the true information being disclosed indirectly at the conclusion. The narration of historical events and the protagonist's experience of the past are congruent. The collection of words and events illustrates both the physical and psychological journey of the protagonist. This narrative style catalogues the remarkable moments alongside appropriate historical and psychological interpretation. The narrative effectively evokes pathos regarding the protagonist's squandered life due to pride, mirroring the psychological struggles faced by individuals in the post-war context. Thus, Hagar epitomizes the postmodern individual. The authentic narrative evokes genuine sadness, preserving the protagonist's pride and perfection while delving into a tumultuous history.

Hagar's memories are deeply entwined with her sense of self. Her reflections on her upbringing, relationships, and personal choices reveal the pride and stubbornness that define her

character. These memories not only illuminate Hagar's personality but also highlight the societal and familial influences that shaped her. For example, her father's strict and authoritative demeanour instils in her a relentless sense of pride, a trait that often isolates her from others. Hagar's recollections of her marriage to Bram Shipley and her estrangement from her children underscore the complexities of her relationships, offering insight into how her past decisions impact her present isolation.

While memory serves as a link to identity, it also becomes a source of pain for Hagar. Her recollections are fraught with regret, particularly regarding her strained relationships with her children, Marvin and John. The narrative delves into her inability to express affection, a recurring theme that underscores her internal conflict. Hagar's reflection on her treatment of John, whose rebellious nature mirrors her own, reveals the cyclical nature of familial patterns and the weight of unspoken emotions.

The narrative emphasises transcending a troubled past by engaging with the present, highlighting the significance of memories and their vibrancy to an individual's life. The memory contains subtle faults that enable the protagonist to distort and amplify specific events, resulting in an inaccurate narrative devoid of any internal motive. Readers discern the distortion of the actual truth as they reflect on the work, prompting them to analyse it more deeply while remaining sceptical of the unreliable narrator. *The Stone Angel* has a structured narrative, depicting the protagonist's recollections, Hagar Shipley, as she revisits her extensive experiences in flashbacks throughout the novel. The account of events commences in her childhood with her father and continues until she visits the Manawaka cemetery, which is not an innovative narrative approach. Laurence does not employ the chaos and distortion of events from memory, which underpins memory distortion, as a form of artistic excellence. Instead, she transitions to artificiality, where the events are recounted from memory in chronological sequence. The mind is susceptible to several defects characterising the remembering process, yet Laurence does not employ this in *The Stone Angel*.

The current solitude and devastation surrounding her compel her to revisit earlier occurrences. The nurse's gaze allows her to remember her initial experience in the hospital at Marvin's birth. Her wait in the doctor's office alongside Dorris and John evokes memories of her previous wait in Shipley's residence, and her transition to the seashore recalls her impending departure from Manawaka. Her analogous perspective on the children revelling together enables her to reflect on a comparable occurrence and recollections of the lilac blossom. Consequently, the current events prompt her to recall prior experiences through associative memory. The preliminary descriptions of key characters like Bram and John are presented at the first narrative level, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of their portrayals at the subsequent narrative level.

Hagar's memory is not objective; it is selective and shaped by her emotions. At times, she clings to moments of pride, such as her defiance against societal expectations, while repressing memories that confront her with her vulnerabilities. This selective recollection is evident in her romanticization of her independence and her reluctance to acknowledge her dependence on others in her old age. Laurence uses this selective memory to explore the human tendency to construct narratives that align with one's self-perception.

Laurence masterfully intertwines Hagar's memories with her present-day experiences, creating a non-linear narrative that mirrors the fluidity of memory. As Hagar navigates her declining health and impending death, the past constantly intrudes on the present, shaping her interactions and decisions. The juxtaposition of past and present emphasizes the inescapable nature of memory and its role in shaping identity, even in old age.

It is well understood from her words that pride has been the sole thing that has led to the consequences in losing everything and in hesitating to express her love towards others. "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" (Laurence 293).

The reminiscence of Hagar provides us with a narrative concerning Hagar, her father, and her marital life with Bram Shipley. Most situations presented to the readers are depicted as recollected pieces, oscillating between the present and the past. For example, there are recollections, including Hagar's narrative to Mr. Tory of her life with Shipley and her desire to have photographs at home upon joining the Shipley family. Hagar recalls the emotionally significant event of Marvin's birth. Her recollections are significant, akin to those experienced in Shipley's residence and her temporary residence at Mr Oatley's house. *Hagar's tale* is a flashback, illustrating how inherited pride has resulted in a poor life and bad relationships. She recalls all the instances in which she refused to compromise with family members, donning a mantle of pride and obstinacy that frustrates those around her. Her tendency to suppress her emotions and conceal her true self from others to maintain her dignity ultimately becomes a burden. This illustrates her transformation into an unreliable narrator, concealing her true identity.

Hagar's narrative voice and recollections authentically represent the experiences of a ninety-year-old woman reflecting on her history. They acknowledge her diverse roles as a daughter, wife, and mother. The voyage reveals her victimisation by personal bias, highlighting her pride and arrogance. 'Roshan Shahan' rightly asserts that the trip fosters self-awareness:

Nonetheless these journeys do lead the protagonists more often than not to new “horizons” of self awareness and to a clearer perception of their relations with families than those which they possessed at the beginning of their journeys. Undoubtedly, these journeys are not always taken in a spirit of enterprise and anticipation; in fact, more often than not, they are acts of desperation, attempts to get away from the constraint of family life. Yet here again is seen the circular route back home, to a new acceptance or at least to a new awareness of family one chose to leave behind.(76)

As Hagar's narrative unfolds, one discerns far more than mere wistful reflections of advanced age. Initially, we recognise the aspect of pride within her that renders her susceptible to personal bias.

Hagar Shipley is both upheld and rendered monstrous by her pride. Hagar's pride is influenced by her ancestral and historical background. Jason Currie, her father, was an unwaveringly proud and devout urbanite, and the battle cry of the Currie clan, which Hagar adopted, was “Gainsay Who Dare.” Pride influenced Hagar's behaviour even in her youth. It is her fragility that has precipitated her decline from favour. Hagar embodies a fallen angel consumed by the corrosive force of her pride. Hagar existed in a conflict against all who approached her and, regrettably, she betrayed each of them—her father, her brother, her husband, and her sons. In this display of pride, Hagar renounces all maternal and tender aspects from her childhood, culminating in her refusal to don her deceased mother's shawl to console her dying brother, Dan. She declines to assume the role of a housekeeper, like to Auntie Doll. Ironically, these refusals ultimately reverse. Hagar Shipley is a poignant character who gains an understanding of the contemporary situation. She uncovers her identity and realises her alone. Hagar transcends her self-imposed seclusion and alienation, purging the inner biases that rendered her a victim. She progresses towards a significant relationship with others, as demonstrated by the bedpan incident in the hospital. She perseveres against the encroaching darkness until the very end. Her last words are “And then” – (TSA 308) spoken in the novel at the moment of her demise. This sentence is incomplete. Laurence finishes the novel with ambivalence. Ultimately, while Hagar comes to acknowledge the past, she continues to perceive her experience of loss and pain as disproportionate.

Towards the end of the novel, Hagar confronts her memories with greater honesty, leading to moments of redemption and reconciliation. Her recognition of her own flaws and the harm she has caused allows her to find a measure of peace. The act of sharing her story, both with herself and others, becomes a means of coming to terms with her life, suggesting the potential for growth and understanding, even in the face of mortality. In *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence uses memory and the past as powerful tools to delve into themes of identity, regret, and reconciliation. Through Hagar Shipley's poignant reflections, the novel underscores the enduring influence of the past on the present, illustrating how memory can both confine and liberate. Hagar's journey offers a profound meditation on the human condition, exploring the delicate balance between holding on and letting go.

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