Independence Versus Community: Gendered Contradictions in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and *The Fire-Dwellers*

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Abstract

Hagar and Stacey, two of Margaret Laurence's protagonists not usually considered together, share a host of gendered contradictions in their efforts to live full and balanced lives. They are victimized by their efforts to survive, strive for agency only to find themselves more contained, and meet their needs by contributing to their own oppression.

Résumé

Hagar et Stacey, deux des protagonistes de Margaret Laurence qui ne sont pas habituellement considérées ensemble, partage un bon nombre de contradictions dans leurs efforts pour vivre des vies pleines et équilibrées. Elles sont victimes par leurs efforts pour survivre, elles s'efforcent pour l'agence pour se voir encore plus contenues, et rencontrent leurs besoins en contribuant à leur propre oppression.

Traditionally, critics have aligned Margaret Laurence's Manawaka protagonists with each other in logical but now predictable patterns. *A Jest of God's* Rachel Cameron is a repressed spinster trying to reach beyond her own small-town limits, while her sister, *The Fire-Dwellers'* Stacey Cameron, is the more successful of the two because she strikes out for Vancouver with her husband and children. Since these sisters confront the same hometown and familial challenges, they are assumed to "constitut[e] a single imaginative unit" (Comeau 2005, 74); they inhabit "sister novels [that] end with acceptance and affirmation," and are ultimately "[r]econciled with the people they live with, but accepting [of] their human limitations...[and] ready for a change" (Stovel 1996, 77).

A second conventional pairing features *The Stone Angel's* Hagar Shipley alongside *The Diviners'* Morag Gunn, two courageous and independent women who leave their men behind. Oftentimes *The Diviners* is credited with completing *The Stone Angel's* symbolic contributions to Canadian identity (Fulford 1974, H5; Montagnes 1964, 17), and both novels are heralded as triumphant women's stories that "relate the journey through life of a country girl into a wise and heroic adulthood" (MacSween 1974, 108).[1] One wonders, then, why Margaret Laurence herself crossed these alignments by describing *The Fire-Dwellers'* Stacey as the "spiritual grand-daughter" of *The Stone Angel's* Hagar (Laurence 1983, 33). Based on the order in which she began writing her Manawaka cycle of stories, Laurence seems to have made the link between these two characters from the outset. After she completed *The Stone Angel*, she started writing *The Fire-Dwellers*, but

burned the draft and did not pick up Stacey's story again until after she wrote *A Jest of God* (King 1997, 246-47).

One ironic explanation for why Laurence paired Hagar with Stacey lies in the author's politic characterization of these two women as starkly different according to their generations, historical circumstances, personalities, and choices. Older generation Hagar is a curmudgeon who sacrifices everyone she has ever loved at the altar of her own indomitable independence. Comparatively, Stacey is a willing sacrificial lamb taken for granted by her family. These characters seem to walk through different doors to the same contradiction. Whether Hagar regards independence as her highest value, or Stacey values community, both experience the inevitably gendered tug-of-war between personal independence and a crushing social pressure to trade autonomy for the larger familial good. Susan Warwick sheds light on why such turmoil has not been the focus of critical inquiry when she notes that critics have tended to be "[l]ured to discover coherence, order and harmony in [Laurence's] fiction" rather than focus on the "contradictions the writing presents" (Warwick 1998, 184). And yet it is in the contradictions where Laurence's insight is razor sharp.

Hagar and Stacey experience a host of gendered contradictions in their efforts to live full and balanced lives - both women are victimized by their efforts to survive, both strive for agency only to find themselves more contained, and as both insist on having their needs met they contribute to their own oppression. By considering these two novels together, we can conclude that their protagonists do endure, but painfully so in a society that undermines the autonomy of wives and mothers. The women's doomed efforts to create fully human lives - no matter who they are as individuals or how they go about trying - seem to argue implicitly for women's widespread resistance to the forces that diminish them.

Hagar's Conflicted Independence

Hagar's confrontational style leaves no question about her formidable strength and insistence on independence that flow from both cultural background and personal predisposition. Simone Vauthier hypothesizes that, "While Hagar's hardness is, in the overall context, largely induced by her milieu and upbringing, the Scottish Presbyterian ethics and the pioneer experience, putting a high premium on courage, independence, 'character', the development of the 'rigidity' isotopy underlines the personal, psychic element in Hagar's obduracy" (Vauthier 1990, 57). Her independence is demonstrated early when as a child she embarrasses her father by drawing attention to the bugs in his sultana raisin bin and then withstands his consequent punishment without tears. Even he recognizes his style of strength and independence in her: "'You take after me,' he said as though that made everything clear. 'You've got backbone, I'll give you that'" (Laurence 1964, 10).

This same "backbone" makes sense of Hagar's stand for independence years later when she rejects her father's attempts to make her a dependent angel in his house rather than allow her to accept a teaching post out in the world. Father and daughter steam towards each other like trains on the same track: she balks at his pressure to sacrifice her independence for the sake of his bookkeeping, and he insists on her compliance in a world where women cannot vote, are not considered persons, and are subject to a Victorian middle-class conviction that women's work is subordinate to men's. An inspiration for female resolve, she reduces the oppressive patriarch to pleading:

> "'Hagar-' he said. 'You'll not go, Hagar.' The only time he ever called me by my name. To this day I couldn't say if it was a question or a command. I didn't argue with him. There never was any use in that. But I went, when I was good and ready, all the same." (1964, 49)

When her father attempts to break her engagement to Bram Shipley by pointing out that marrying without family consent is "not done," Hagar can almost taste her own power: "'It'll be done by me,' I said, drunk with exhilaration at my daring" (1964, 49).

Until she marries Bram, Hagar's independent streak seems promising. Regardless of obvious limitations in her ability to nurture, evidenced by her unwillingness to comfort her dying brother, she seems capable of carrying through with her determination to live her own life. Promise eventually dissolves into despair because her act of standing up for herself against her father slowly but surely backfires as she becomes a ground down farm wife humiliated by her coarse husband. While iron-willed independence wins her father success as a pioneer merchant, the same trait costs Hagar a woman's ultimate measure in her society - her father, husband, and son.

Hagar's marriage to Bram entrenches her in contradiction because, despite his appreciation of her rebellious spirit, he cannot reward her bid for independence from her father with anything beyond a hard physical life of minding the hearth and bearing his babies in an age before electric stoves and washing machines. He does not have the personal or financial resources to give her a life other than the one that wore down and most likely killed his first wife. Hagar's bids for independence are marked by doomed attempts to change the men in her life. She is no more able to transform Bram into someone who "prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar" than she is to convince her own father to transcend his pride and become involved with his grandchildren (1964, 50).

The same independence that inspires readers to call her a heroine inevitably isolates her. She eschews social communion with other women because of her contempt for traditional femininity. To her, willfulness is a differentiating characteristic from conventional femininity, a trait concretized in her own mother whose more traditional passivity made her "a flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard" (1964, 4). She bases her sense of strength and independence on exactly this difference when she declares, "I used to wonder what she'd been like, that docile woman, and wonder at her weakness and my awful strength" (1964, 59). At the same time, she distances herself from the men closest to her in a campaign to deploy her considerable strength in fighting the unfairness of patriarchal privilege. As Brenda Beckman-Long points out, "[h]er opposition is motivated by an attempt to protect the vulnerability of her position in society as a woman. Precisely because she is a woman, part of her self-discovery is that she has had to live 'alone and against' in order to preserve her autonomy in a male-dominated society" (Beckman-Long 1997, 63).

However, in yet another narrative turn of the screw, the same independent spirit that costs her human affinity also wins her whatever small measure of power she attains: she goes where she wants, speaks to whom she wants, and actively avoids situations she does not like. Hagar cannot complain about not having a voice when she acknowledges, "I can't keep my mouth shut. I never could," and is recognized by her husband as the rebel who determines the fate of the family: "Bram looked at me. 'I got nothing to say, Hagar. It's you that's done the saying'" (1964, 90; 142). In this context of her desperate fight for autonomy, she begins to understand the contradiction of her independence: it is her saving grace as well as her worst enemy, the latter especially so when she regrets what she has done to those she loves for the sake of it. Margaret Atwood quotes Laurence's wish for female independence without sacrificing family:

> Men have to be reeducated with the minimum of damage to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers...we can't live without them, and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well. [Laurence] disagrees with extremists who state as a general principle that women should not have

> children, or that women who leave their husbands should dump the children on them. (Atwood 1977, 36)

In Hagar's life, this tricky negotiation does not succeed, but her life ends at the beginning of the 1960s, a vantage point from which Laurence could look forward to the possibility of a balance of power between men and women, especially within the family and workplace where their equality had been so obviously curtailed.

Laurence seems to offer Tina Shipley (Marvin's daughter, Hagar's grand-daughter) as the embodiment of hope for future independent wives and mothers. An emblem of equality in her domestic partnership (the very terrain that Hagar found so treacherous), Tina appears to be successful in combining a career with marriage. Doris tells Hagar that Tina has gone "hundreds of miles away" to "take a job down East" (1964, 66). According to Tina's brother, Steven, "Mom wants her to be married here, but Tina says she can't spare the time and neither can August - that's the guy she's marrying. So Mom's going to fly down East for the wedding, she thinks" (294). Evidently, traditional family wishes, no less approval, are secondary to Tina's work schedule.

Tina seems to have transcended, or at least delayed, the tension that Laurence identified in her own life: "[I] felt enormous guilt about taking the time for writing away from my family. My generation was brought up to believe you had to iron the sheets" (qtd. in Atwood 1997, 36). She hearkened back to her discovery in the 1960s of the phenomenon that Betty Friedan explored in 1963 in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's realization that "most women can no longer use their full strength, grow to their full human capacity, as housewives" apparently made an impact on Laurence (Friedan 1963, 305):

> Of course I was writing about the situations of women; I was dealing with a lot of the stuff Women's Lib is talking about right now. But at the time I was doing it I didn't realize how widespread some of these feelings were....you weren't supposed to say those things out loud, to question the assumption that the woman's only role was that of housewife. (Laurence qtd. in Atwood 1997, 36-37)

Caught as she was between her resentment of domesticity's small compass and her guilt about insisting on a career, Laurence may well have envisioned Tina as a step toward resolving the harsh trade-offs women have traditionally had to make for either independence or community. Tina has a wider range of options, and does not experience pressure to choose between marriage and a career.

Yet even as Hagar holds up Tina as a symbol of hopefulness, her own experience as wife and mother leads her to question the plausibility of this resolution actually working for a woman: "I pray God she marries, although the Lord only knows where she'll find a man who'll bear her independence" (Laurence 1964, 62). Tina apparently does find a man who will bear her independence as a wife - as Bram may well have done for Hagar had they never had children - but we do not see how Tina fares as a mother. Indeed, in the historical world, the uncompromising tension between work and motherhood extends into the twenty-first century, bolstering Hagar's prescient cynicism about the likelihood of women successfully combining personal and professional worlds.

For Hagar, any idealized resolution of a woman's independence in a man's world is poisoned by regret. She regards her breaks with family members as something less than glorious and feels guilty for depriving the fathers - her own father and the father of her children - of opportunities to interact with their offspring. She also feels guilty for the damage she has done to her own male children in the process. She reaches her nadir when she confesses to Murray Lees in the cannery her unwitting role (but a role nonetheless) in her son John's death. Her focus on regret over her parenting mistakes points to a change in her, away from the Hagar who earlier in the

novel told the ministering Mr. Troy that her son died: "'I had a son,' I say, 'and lost him.' 'You're not alone,' says Mr. Troy. 'That's where you're wrong,' I reply" (1964, 121). She repeats the same line to Mr. Lees, but acknowledges him as a father who shares her experience as a mother: "'I had a son,' I say, 'and lost him. 'Well,' he says abruptly, 'then you know'" (1964, 234). On the basis of their shared experience of having inadvertently destroyed a son, Mr. Lees learns enough about her to call her living son, Marvin, to come and get her. Her newfound community with Mr. Lees provides him sufficient information to block her escape from Marvin and Doris. Still, the question remains whether Hagar's confession resolves the contradiction between independence and community in her life.

A long line of critics believes in Hagar's last-minute redemption after ninety years of being what Marvin refers to as a "holy terror" (Laurence 1964, 304).[2] As Vauthier argues, Hagar "has been humanized, 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" (Vauthier 1990, 65). More skeptical, perhaps, is the observation that the vulnerability Hagar shows to Mr. Lees occurs in the context of her pattern of leaving situations where dependence becomes intolerable for her, as expressed in her generalization about such leave-takings earlier in her life: "Each venture and launching is impossible until it becomes necessary, and then there's a way, and it doesn't do to be too fussy about the means" (Laurence 1964, 135). Her communion with Murray Lees occurs in the middle of another one of these leave-takings, after she had run away from Marvin and Doris because they threatened to make her dependent by placing her in a nursing home. Although she gestures toward community with Mr. Lees, it is in the context of her geriatric freedom flight that is every bit as doomed as the one she took into marriage. She was not likely to have returned voluntarily to Marvin and Doris without Lees betraying her.

The reader has to be suspicious of any claim that Hagar resolves the double-bind of her own independence and the love of family members. At her age now, her life is no longer marked by the social ramifications of her sexual and reproductive capacities; she could very well be a man living with an adult child. All the same, what remains consistent is Hagar's pattern of flipping back and forth between her independent stands and her consequent regret. If the narrative solution of *The Stone Angel* is to be understood in terms of a woman's redemption, then there is a need to discount persistent evidence of the same old Hagar that arises in the dilemmas she faces at the hospital at the end of her life. On one hand, identifying Hagar as reconciled to dependence the moment she accepts a glass of water on her deathbed invites the reader to make a decision about how plausible it would be for a woman like Hagar to do at this particular juncture what she has never managed to do before. As Gordon Graham explains, this assessment is crucial:

> It is especially important to note that the perspective does not arise from the contention that "people don't do that sort of thing". In imaginative literature we are not presented with generalizations about human behaviour but with characters. It is rather that Dombey, or Micawber, or Hulot, [or, by extrapolation, Hagar,] would not do that sort of thing. (Graham 1998, 202)

Hagar must be assessed according to what she has done over the course of the story and within the fictional and historical world that contains her. Would this old curmudgeon finally embrace community?

Wariness about Hagar's eleventh-hour conversion arises generally from the fact that she never stops see-sawing between her own need for independence and her wish to be connected to others. One moment of possible redemption occurs in the hospital, when Hagar hears her hospital roommate, Sandra Wong, whimper in

discomfort because she needs assistance to go to the bathroom. Hagar helps her call an unresponsive nurse, and then decides to get the bedpan herself. Arguably, her motivation can be seen as anger rather than humanitarianism, suggesting she did the good turn as a way of fighting the injustice, by extrapolation, of her own dependence. Hagar fumes that Sandra has: "never before been at the dubious mercy of her organs. Pain and humiliation have been only words to her. Suddenly I'm incensed at it, the unfairness. She shouldn't have to find out these things at her age" (1964, 300). Hagar herself sees her motivation as complicated: "And now I wonder if I've done it for her or for myself. No matter. I'm here, and carrying what she needs" (301).

While it is true that she has done Sandra a good turn, no matter the motivation, the argument for Hagar's fundamental change at this point becomes less convincing if the good was collateral to yet another act of rebellious independence. Hagar and Sandra's resultant conspiratorial laughter together is articulated by Sandra as a response to the nurse looking at Hagar "as though you had just done a crime," an idea that would please Hagar no end since she can once again break the rules (1964, 302). The forbidden act makes it even more attractive for this incorrigible rebel, and might even be a comfort in a hospital where she must stare down the powerlessness and dependence that comes with imminent death.

Another moment that holds out promise for Hagar transcending her problematic relationship with independence and community occurs when Doris, an exceptionally accommodating daughter-in-law, offers Hagar a glass of water. Hagar cannot, even at death's door, seem to accept her own dependence, which she regards as the point of Doris' offer. Despite knowing that she defeats her sense of familial community by not accepting help, she wrests "the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands" (1964, 308). This reaction can be seen as a deathbed intransigence that demonstrates how committed she remains to her signature rebelliousness. Once again, Hagar has perceived community as compromising her independence in ways she cannot abide. She has never willingly played the dependent daughter, wife, mother, or mother-in-law despite myriad social pressures throughout her life to do so, and each expression of independence has cost her another human connection.

The point here is that Hagar faces the same restricted choices as any other woman in her time and place. Indeed, throughout her life she fights the same gender issues that eventually spawned the second-wave feminist movement. If Hagar truly realizes that her autonomy and need for community are equally important, and believes she can harmonize them both within her life, the novel's ending challenges the reader to envision how this harmony might be lived out. Although *The Stone Angel* was published more than 45 years ago, feminists continue to highlight the struggles women face in combining their seemingly incompatible social roles. Intransigent challenges to women trying to "have it all" characterize Laurence's portrayal of women's lives.

What are we to make of Hagar as a woman? If she is just a cranky and confused old woman who finally and mercifully dies despite her heroic gestures, what does her unresolved dilemma between independence and community mean? The assumption that Hagar resolves anything misses the point raised by her ill-fated attempts to incorporate independence and community into her life, since an old woman still fighting into her death signifies a very different denouement than does a death-bed redemption. Readers expecting inspired representations of female identity might see her redemption as a symbol of change: if Hagar can finally figure out a way to reconcile her lifelong turmoil, perhaps women in general might find ways to harmonize career, autonomy, love, and family. Significantly, Laurence continues to hold the feet of female independence to the flame of sacrifice. Since Hagar's strength costs her happiness, her agency causes regret, and her incorrigibility is ultimately

self-destructive, she positions readers as witnesses to the crushing of an individual consciousness by larger social and psychological forces as she fights to maintain her autonomy in a social world that trades female independence for familial community.

Stacey's Conflicted Community

Incompatible desires for independence and community inform similar female characterization in *The Fire Dwellers* but within a more contemporary time period and in a new generation of historical circumstances. Stacey, too, pits herself against patriarchal containment but uses a different strategy. Hagar could not keep her mouth shut, but Stacey chooses to be silent, presumably the easiest way to remain enmeshed in her domestic circumstances. As Clara Thomas noted early on, "Stacey is always in life, not apart from it, striving to reach others, not to separate herself from them" (Thomas 1975, 128).

Stacey also differs from Hagar in her decision to stay in her marriage regardless of her dissatisfaction with everything about her life. She sees herself as fat: "for hips like mine there's no excuse" (Laurence 1969, 8); hypocritical: "Funny thing, I never swear in front of my kids. This makes me feel I'm being a good example to them. Example of what? All the things I hate. Hate but perpetuate" (9); ignorant of her city (10); poorly dressed, with her "matronly coat, hat and gloves" (13-14); old: "Sometimes I feel like a beat-up old bitch (17); by turns a neglectful and then angry mother (19); and unbalanced (20). She feels like a bad mother and a bad wife when Mac comes home from a business trip and assumes immediately that she is fighting with him: "But I'm bloody tired and I don't feel like starting one of these" (1969, 26). He accuses her of babying their sons by going to their rooms when they have bad dreams. Perhaps most upsetting is the depiction of their sex life that does not give her pleasure. In fact, Mac often tries to choke her:

> Then Mac is not too tired just when she is. He draws her between his legs, and she touches him sirenly so he will not know. When he is inside her, he puts his hands on her neck, as he sometimes does unpredictably. He presses down deeply on her collarbone.
>
> Mac please
>
> That can't hurt you not that much. Say it doesn't hurt.
>
> It hurts.
>
> It can't. Not even this much. Say it doesn't hurt.
>
> It doesn't hurt.
>
> He comes, then, and goes to sleep. The edges of the day are blurring in Stacey's head now. (1969, 30)

It is difficult to imagine the damage done to Stacey's psyche in trying to actualize herself as a healthy human being in these circumstances. She lives the contradiction of a woman choosing family community as her highest value, and having to sacrifice all semblance of personal autonomy and dignity in order to live it out.

While at first blush Hagar and Stacey seem polar opposites, with Hagar's independence costing her community and Stacey's community costing her independence, closer examination reveals their engagement with similar dynamics. As they begin to wrestle with their unsatisfactory circumstances, they do so within markedly female contradictions, one of which is the need to hide their sexuality while still meeting their sexual needs.

Both women hoard secret experiences of sexual pleasure. Hagar did not think she had a right to sexual satisfaction, evidenced by her appreciation of sex with Bram as an unanticipated pleasure of marriage: "It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and I made certain that the trembling was all inner" (Laurence 1964, 81). Bram's inability to provide for her consigns her to a prison of

domesticity and prompts her to hide the fact that he met more of her sexual needs than he knew. She jettisons her appreciation for this communion they do have so that she can continue to rail against the sacrifices she has to make. In effect, she loses twice.

Stacey's version of this contradiction is to exercise her agency to meet her own sexual needs with someone other than her husband. A child of her times in her no-strings-attached encounter with hippie Luke on the beach, she engages in an affair that is remarkable in large part because she never has to suffer for it, indicating a measure of social freedom more conventionally granted to men. As Thomas has noted, "[Luke] sees her quite simply and exclusively as a woman; therefore, he helps her to see herself momentarily as a singular being, freed of the kaleidoscopic wife-mother-housekeeper roles in which others see her and with all of which, simultaneously, she constantly tries to identify herself" (Thomas 1975, 123).

Stacey's sexually liberated affair with Luke highlights the double-standard that underpins the community she lives out at home. Mac minimizes his extra-marital sex with Delores Appleton as unimportant because it was only once, and what Dolores really needed was "to be cared about by some guy over a long time" (Laurence 1969, 220). His pity for Delores belies an assumption that men want sex, but women want emotional commitment. The depiction of Stacey's affair highlights the flaw in his thinking, since she is a true desperate housewife, desperate for sex, not emotional commitment. She admits her own desperation to herself as she recognizes she may seem overly enthusiastic:

> She is surprised by the force of her own response, the intensity and explicitness of her pleasure.
>
> --Stacey, ease up. Not so fast....Rein in, Stacey, or Luke will think you're a whore. Well, he'll be wrong, then. Whores don't want it that much. Only women like me, who think there may not be that much time left. Luke-Luke? Am I begging? All right, so I'm begging.

Despite the fact that Stacey wants nothing more than sex with Luke, Mac remains tied to his rigid perceptions of women as emotional rather than sexual beings. He also reports that he had sex with Delores because he mistakenly thought Stacey had done the same with Buckle. Presumably, though, Mac does not now expect Stacey to run out and have sex with someone else because of his mistake. While the text might gesture to Stacey's sexual independence with Luke, the novel turns on Stacey's resignation to live within Mac's stereotypes of women.

Even the narrative presentation of Mac's and Stacey's affairs demonstrates the cost of Stacey's independence because of her connection to Mac. Although Mac's affair occurs prior to Stacey's affair with Luke, the text introduces his affair after hers. This ordering of the plot is important in that it draws attention to Mac's erroneous assumption about women needing long-term care rather than sex. Stacey's need for an affair is a response to the constraints on her as an oppressed and self-less housewife. Her awareness that her interest in Luke is overwhelmingly sexual argues for a new explanation of women's sexuality: loosened from the moorings of biological attachments to the family, Stacey is capable of demonstrating the kind of independence evident in stereotypic male sexuality.

Significantly, mutual confessions are juxtaposed, accentuating the fact that Mac's can be articulated while Stacey's cannot. Laurence does not allow Stacey to make her confession to Mac, implying that, despite a woman's insistence on her own freedom, a man's response to his woman's infidelity would be less understanding or forgiving than a woman's response to her man's infidelity:

> But I did with Luke, and you don't know that and I can't tell you because would it do any good to tell you? I don't think so. I want to, but I can't. Maybe it'll come out twenty years from now just like this about Buckle has come out now. In the meantime, we carry our own suitcases. How was it I never knew how many you were carrying? Too busy toting my own. (1969, 220)

Stacey contributes to the double-standard by remaining silent, knowing that her ability to continue living in her family depends on it, thereby enabling Mac's sexism.

Stacey and Mac never get close to understanding each other. Mac expresses only mild surprise when her response to his confession of infidelity with Dolores is, "I don't mind honestly," and his rhetorical strategy is to change the subject quickly (1969, 221). Just as Hagar hoarded her sexual appreciation of Bram, Stacey hoards her own confession of sexual independence, conveying the unspoken message that whatever freedom she experienced via the affair is available to her only because she can hide it from a world that is less forgiving of women's sexual transgression. Instead of Mac and Stacey appearing reconciled at the end of this sequence (because they have experienced similar lapses), they seem more estranged than ever.

Like Hagar in the hospital with Sandra Wong, Stacey also experiences moments when change seems possible. For example, the prospect of Mac's fatherly devotion introduces in the novel a possibility of more flexible gender roles. Whatever hope there is for Stacey to reconcile the contradictory pressures of independence and community comes in a moment of trauma about their son Duncan when both parents are terrified that he might have drowned. Stacey acknowledges that Mac has "never held Duncan before, not ever. Why did I think he didn't care about Duncan? Maybe he didn't once. But he does now. Why didn't I see how much, before? He never showed it, that's why..." (1964, 295). Her responsibility for childcare and his textbook inability to articulate his feelings undermine her domestic happiness. One would hope that if Mac is capable of change toward domesticity, then Stacey's acquisition of more personal freedom is also possible. Disappointingly, and despite Mac's fatherly gesture to Duncan, this interpretation is ultimately difficult to justify, given the ending.

Mac's response to Duncan's near drowning does not change the nature of his domestic involvement. The reader does not see Stacey and Mac living the kind of relationship in which they meet each other's needs, nor providing Stacey with new freedoms: he forgets her fortieth birthday (1969, 277); she gives up on dancing anywhere else but in her head (276); he does not pay attention to her nervousness about taking Duncan back to the beach (270-271); he has a lackluster response to Stacey's excitement about Jen talking for the first time (273). This story of a housewife who decides to stay with her family ultimately details the costs of such a commitment.

The end of the novel finds Stacey as she was at the beginning, unhappy and constrained by her gender, notwithstanding her ability to cobble together a way to meet her needs as a wife, mother, and lover. Her continued silence about her secret love life raises the question of whether her interests as a woman can ever be satisfied within her marriage, particularly when her marital sexual relationship has been less than satisfactory. After making love with Mac at the end, Stacey replays her usual experience of lying stiffly and having difficulty settling for sleep, while Mac immediately rolls over and descends into regular breathing (280-281). This interpretation counters the persistent critical view that "[u]ltimately, Stacey and Mac are reconciled and truly make love for the first time in the narrative" (Stovel 2008, 223).

In this novel, Stacey does not triumph in a new and more liberated time, but rather endures much as women always have. Rather than offer solutions, Laurence seems more inclined to explore women's need to

combine love and autonomy. Any progress in Stacey's development is limited to growth in her understanding that "all the people around her are also living in burning houses, in persistent states of emergency" (Grosskurth 1970, 92). Societal states of emergency here mark women's building political resistance to a life limited by domesticity. Yet, Stacey's decision to stay in her marriage signals that Laurence does not locate an easy solution in leaving the home for fulfillment in an independent career.

Considering Hagar and Stacey together allows us to see not only why Laurence saw them as spiritually connected, but also how she used them to explore the choices available to women who wanted to change the lives available to them. Since Hagar played the part of the heroine who refused to be dominated by a man and who defiantly chose independence, she is easier to celebrate as strong, despite her regrets. Stacey is more difficult to see as inspirational, in part because she approaches the same limitations from a different angle. Seen as a protagonist whose "thoughts, in the first person, are a rebellious and anguished protest against the falseness of her wife-and-mother façade," she mounts her protest still caught within the familial system that oppresses her (Hehner 1977, 47).

As Warwick illuminates, contradictory images of women as victims and survivors have been seen by decades of feminist scholarship as describing "the basic nature of female experience in the world that Laurence could not resolve" (Warwick 1998, 184). These two female characters struggle by turns as victims and survivors, are bogged down by their agency, and subvert their own power no matter what choices they make. Superficial differences of personality and generation pale in comparison to the enduring societal pressures on women to sacrifice their independence for family life in a different way from men.

Stacey and Rachel are, indeed, created as sisters, and Hagar and Morag are notable for their independence, but these traditional pairings obscure an ongoing experiment with gender evident in Laurence's work. Rachel does not have a husband or children, while Morag tries the husband without the child and then the child without the husband. Hagar and Stacey are both wives and mothers, and, although they fight against confining gender roles, they are trapped as mirror images of each other in the same conflicted space between what they need and what they get: Hagar is crippled by the costs of her independence, and Stacey by the costs of her family. Rather than rendering different choices as leading to different fates, Laurence depicts Hagar and Stacey - surprisingly, and perhaps depressingly - making different decisions that lead to the same failure to find a way of being in their social world that allows them to enjoy whatever happiness they might otherwise have earned for themselves as free individuals.

Endnotes

1. For additional discussion of connections between *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners* see Hildegard Kuester's *The Crafting of Chaos: Narrative Structure in Margaret Laurence's* The Stone Angel *and* The Diviners.

2. For wider reading about whether Hagar develops toward redemption or continues to resist personal change, see (among others) Hildegard Kuester's *The Crafting of Chaos: Narrative Structure in Margaret Laurence's* The Stone Angel *and* The Diviners; J. David Stevens', "The Gypsies of Shadow Point: Meg Merriles, Murray Lees, and Laurence's *The Stone Angel*"; Constance Rooke's "A Feminist Reading of *The Stone Angel*"; Paul Comeau's "Hagar in Hell: Margaret Laurence's Fallen Angel"; W.H. New's "Every Now and Then: Voice and Language in Laurence's *The Stone Angel*"; Shirley Chew's "'Some Truer Image': A Reading of *The Stone Angel*"; Brenda Beckman-Long's "*The Stone Angel* as a Feminine Confessional Novel."

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