

Studená, Pavlína

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# TRANSFORMING PERSPECTIVES: AGING, ANGER, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE STONE ANGEL*

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PAVLÍNA STUDENÁ

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## Abstract

Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964) explores the process of aging as a time of reflection and self-discovery, marked by a reassessment of perspective and life values. This personal transformation juxtaposes the development of a renewed relation to nature, both literal and metaphorical. However, this transformative process is complicated by intergenerational divides, misunderstanding, and resistance to change. Mutual understanding between generations and acceptance of the idea of humans as part of nature are prerequisites for personal and societal growth. Significantly, the anger that often accompanies the necessary reassessment of values can be productively channelled as a driving force for positive change. Through the lens of Laurence's novel, the article demonstrates the potential for intergenerational understanding and cooperation to facilitate positive social change. It is not resistance but rather this mutual understanding that can be achieved at any age, offering the possibility of reconciliation at both personal and societal levels.

## Key words

*Aging; anger; ecocriticism; intergenerational understanding; Margaret Laurence; human-nature relationship; reconciliation*

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In our contemporary era, the phenomenon of aging is gaining prominence as populations grow and life expectancies rise. The demographic shifts bring attention to challenges that resonate far beyond mere statistics. Amidst this discourse, emotions are coming to the fore, particularly in response to the themes of aging, community, and sustainable development models. However, apart from the impact of the aging population on resource consumption, the relationship between aging and environmental issues has not been extensively investigated or discussed until recently. According to Thane (2003: 96), the trend toward an increasing proportion of older individuals, especially in developed countries, is intertwined with evolving cultural attitudes toward the aging population. Contemporary public discourse tends to portray older people as a homogeneous entity comparable to natural catastrophes such as silver or grey "tsunamis," "avalanches," or "floods," implying a looming threat that needs to be managed and contained,

lest it becomes an overwhelming burden on society (Charise 2012: 2). Moreover, older generations are often criticized for contributing to the significant “carbon footprint of the greys” and for their alleged lack of engagement with environmental concerns (Haq et al. 2007: 5). However, recent scholarship suggests “legacy thinking” – a sense of responsibility for future generations – as a strategy for engaging older generations in environmental issues (Frumkin et al. 2012: 1435) and highlights the role of community and intergenerational cooperation (Woodward 2022: 203). Communicating these contexts can promote intergenerational dialogue and draw attention not only to the challenges but also to the entrenched generational stereotypes that contribute to societal tensions.

In exploring generational dynamics, cultural representations emerge as potent tools for shaping societal perspectives, fostering intergenerational belonging, and establishing a framework to promote environmental awareness. According to Garrard (2004: 14), environmental issues stem from the “interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection” and should be analyzed from both a scientific and cultural perspective. Building on this idea, Buell (2005: 19) advocates for reading the discourses of science and literature “both with and against each other,” emphasizing their interrelated roles. Sandilands (2014: 136) adds that works of literature “pluck out the facts of material reality; they then create from these facts a realm of enduring meaning that can then appear to us as a common world,” making the ecocritical reading of literature pivotal for developing an environmental public sphere of mutual understanding.

This article explores the emotional dynamics accompanying the aging process in the context of personal and societal transformation. The theme of personal transformation in the face of aging, as depicted in Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Stone Angel* (1964), provides insights into the broader context of societal tensions around generational divides. Although the novel does not explicitly address environmental issues in today’s sense, it illustrates how the ninety-year-old protagonist, on her path to personal transformation, enters into a dialogical interaction with nature that enables her to abandon established but within the changing world’s largely dysfunctional thinking patterns. Emphasizing the importance of community, the narrative underscores its significance for both the aging individual and a sustainable society. Just as the protagonist struggles to cope with age-related mental decline and increasing powerlessness, society must similarly transform and adapt to a new paradigm of sustainability and intergenerational cooperation. This requires a shift from a focus on individual interests to a more holistic and inclusive approach that considers the perspective of all stakeholders, including future generations. The topic of aging populations, particularly in the context of the current debate on limited resources and sustainability, is inevitably accompanied by emotions. By grounding global issues within the protagonist’s personal challenges, the article argues that the productive channelling of emotions like anger can be a unifying force that can contribute to greater understanding and cooperation across generations.

## Beyond the Divide

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) holds a prominent position within the Canadian literary landscape. Her passionate activism, directed towards various societal issues, notably a dedicated commitment to environmental concerns, further amplifies her enduring impact on both the literary and social scene. *The Stone Angel* (1964) is the opening novel in a series of five books connected with the fictional Canadian prairie town of Manawaka. The story follows Hagar Shipley, a ninety-year-old protagonist, representing people who are hardly noticed and are often subject to negative stereotyping. Despite initial rebelling against her authoritarian Pioneer father, Hagar eventually adopts his provincial conservatism and lives confined by pride and social prejudice, feeling under constant control and, at the same time, controlling and judging the lives of others. It is only in the twilight of her life that Hagar finds the strength for her principal act of rebellion. When she realizes that her son Marvin and his wife Doris plan to sell the family house and Hagar is supposed to move to a senior home, she flees to an abandoned fish cannery at the coast. In her quest for autonomy, Hagar defies not only Marvin and Doris but also her aging body and failing cognitive abilities.

Hagar's story serves as an exploration of the challenges inherent in the aging process. While Constance Rooke (1989: 74) made *The Stone Angel* a prime example of a genre she referred to as *Vollendungsroman*, the novel of "completion," the novel can also be read as a reversal of the traditional feminine *Bildungsroman* schema. Although it is focused on the final life stage of an elderly heroine, the narrative is structured as an extended flashback/memory recollection that depicts the protagonist's coming-of-age and formation experiences from the vantage point of old age. This reverse chronological framing subverts the traditional linear trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* and creates a layered, multi-generational temporality. The protagonist's current perspective as an older person inevitably shapes and filters her recollections of the past *Bildung* experiences and allows for exploration of disillusionment about youthful ideals, reevaluating missed opportunities, and doubts about life choices made. At the same time, however, in Hagar's story, Laurence challenges conventional perceptions of aging as mere decline, presenting old age as offering the possibility of development, personal transformation, and growth (Rooke 1989; Hartung 2016). The protagonist, who is struggling with the changes and challenges of aging, confronts an imminent crisis that she resolves by escaping to the "green world"<sup>1</sup> and returns, if not healed, then transformed.

Until the 1970s, Anglo-Canadian literature was predominantly shaped by a regionalist perspective, championed by many literary critics led by Northrop Frye<sup>2</sup>. However, with the emerging prominence of gender, class, and ethnicity as crucial analytical categories, the concept of place as a critical element of one's identity had been "so deconstructed by poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial critics, that 'place' as a defining construct seemed to have disappeared" (Wardhaugh 2001: 5). In his exploration of the "verbal trope" of land in Canadian writing, W. H. New (1997: 8) introduces the idea of the "language of land" which encompasses not only topographical objects such as mountains, valleys, gardens, or

forests, but functions in literature also as “part of the process of constructing, questioning, and confirming assumptions about social reality.” Canadian literary narratives thus often unfold simultaneously in both the physical world and the mental landscape of protagonists, serving as a commentary on and critical reflection upon social realities. Kamboureli (2014: 19) understands land “at once as the geopolitical space of Canada and as the larger ecological system whose sustenance is intimately linked with humanness.” Tropes and reflections on “nature,” “wilderness,” “landscape,” and “environment” therefore recur in Canadian literature and literary criticism, either in literal or metaphorical ways, “perceived as both terrifyingly different and reassuringly familiar” (Soper and Bradley 2013: xxvi). Wilderness, in particular, holds special significance in the Canadian context because it “combines connotations of trial and danger with freedom, redemption and purity” (Garrard 2004: 61) and is often depicted as a place of both peril and majesty, as well as a source of inspiration and renewal.

Laurence opens *The Stone Angel* (1964: 2-3) by pointing out stark contrasts between culture and nature, between the “civilized” and the “wild,” to mediate between the opposite poles of varied Canadian landscapes and society in accordance with settler experience. Although the Prairies had once been “walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair,” little Hagar has to walk only “on paths, where white kid boots and dangling skirts would not be torn by thistles,” as might happen in the open prairie landscape, where the “tough-rooted” and “wild and gaudy” flowers grow uncultivated in contrast to “the planted peonies ... the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly, too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves.” Laurence juxtaposes an untrammelled landscape where “disrespectful wind” was blowing, spreading the “smell of things that grew untended and had grown always,” and “clearly civilized” plots with “the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings” (1964: 3), in order to mark the boundary between the natural world and the world of human civilization. Laurence also points to the settlers’ endeavour to impose their concepts of beauty and order on the natural environment, thereby dominating and reshaping the landscape.<sup>3</sup>

In this perspective, the character of Hagar, the embodiment of the archetypal Pioneer generation, becomes the focal point of a clash between the two worlds of untamed wilderness and the cultivated and controlled settlers’ gardens and houses. At the beginning of the novel, Hagar is firmly grounded in settler superiority, aspiring “to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness” (1964: 3). She resides within the mental garrison,<sup>4</sup> enclosed by the rules instilled by her authoritarian father and small-town Presbyterian morality. Hagar’s identity becomes intricately tied to the “civilized” world, mainly centred around her house and her possessions:

My shreds and remnants of years are scattered through it visibly in lamps and vases, the needle-point fire bench, the heavy oak chair from the Shipley place, the china cabinet and walnut sideboard from my father’s house ... If I’m not somehow contained in them and in this house ... then I do not know where I am to be found at all. (1964: 34)

At this juncture in the novel, Hagar views her house as proof of her independence. Her “shreds and remnants” encapsulate the essence of her history and serve as a testament to her identity, while the walls of her house help to anchor and define her. However, as Hagar ages and her physical strength and mental abilities begin to decline, her struggle to maintain control over her life and assert her desires and wishes becomes increasingly challenging. From a symbol of pride, Hagar begins to see her house as a prison, feeling like “a fenced cow meeting only the barbed wire whichever way she turns” (49). With growing dependence on Marvin and Doris, Hagar realizes that she has gradually ceded control of her house – and thus of her life – to Marvin and Doris. Because of her physical condition, Hagar, not allowed to lock her room anymore, is under Doris’s almost constant supervision, thus lacking privacy, which she considers “a privilege not granted to the aged or the young” (1964: 4). Drawing parallels between the marginalized status of old people and young children, for “neither are human to the middling ones” (1964: 4), Hagar reflects on their somewhat limited rights. However, while children can look forward to gradually attaining more autonomy as they mature, Hagar recognizes that progressive loss of power is an unfortunate reality for older people. For Hagar, loss of privacy signifies loss of autonomy and dignity. Her house, once a source of pride and identity, now stands as a poignant symbol of captivity and dependence associated with old age.

In reference to artefacts originating from her father’s house, Hagar alludes to the values of the first Canadian settlers, known for their hardiness, independence, and self-reliance, with whom she identifies. Therefore, when she rejects the prospect of spending the rest of her life in a nursing home and instead escapes to the abandoned fish cannery on the seashore, she is initially convinced that, like the Pioneers, she must conquer and dominate the surrounding landscape to find a safe place. On the way to her retreat, Hagar climbs a wooded hill, a genuine struggle as she contends not only with the “hostile” nature but also with the limitations of her aging body:

Walking is difficult. I skid and slide on brown pine needles that lie thickly over the ground. Crashing, I stumble through ferns and rotten boughs that lie scattered like old bones. Cedars lash my face, and my legs are lacerated with brambles ... I’ve done it. Proud as Napoleon or Lucifer, I stand and survey the wasteland I’ve conquered. (186)

If Hagar is a protagonist of a reverse *Bildungsroman*, her ascent up the hill can be considered a rite of passage, the transition from one world to another, from one level of self-knowledge to another. Revelling in her triumph over the wilderness, Hagar sits down and observes the conquered territory. For the first time in her life, she tentatively explores the environment. She realizes that the forest is not a homogeneous and silent entity but rather “crammed with creatures scurrying here and there on multitudinous and mysterious errands” (1964: 187). Plucking a piece of moss that resembles the long and twisted green hair like a wig worn in court, the microcosm before her transforms into a courtroom where a trial is about to take place, casting Hagar as both the accused and the observer, with

“the sparrows as jurors [would] condemn [her] quick as a wink, no doubt” (1964: 187). As a convict, she imprints her fingerprint on a velvety brown mushroom, on whose soft cap her fingerprint remains. Hagar transitions from an invader and conqueror into “a questing and questioning heroine who changes herself rather than changing the landscape” (Dudek 2005: 250). In this peaceful act of stamping her fingerprint on the landscape, Hagar reconciles with nature, realizing that it is not an enemy. As her carefully constructed “fortress” where she would feel “barricaded, safer” (1964: 149) has collapsed, Hagar understands that she may not need “to hide but to seek” (1964: 187). Through her reconciliation with nature and the nonhuman world, Hagar not only re-discovers but also liberates a repressed part of her identity.

To crown her transformation, Hagar arranges some dead June bugs as glittering jewels into her hair. She observes: “[They] liven my grey, transform me. I sit quite still and straight, my hands spread languidly on my knees, queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs” (1964: 211). By decorating herself with June bugs, Hagar acknowledges the beauty and value of these creatures, which she once would have considered insignificant and repellent. She begins to perceive the natural world as a source of beauty and wonder rather than something to be conquered and controlled. With the glittering bugs in her grey hair, Hagar reclaims some of her power and autonomy, asserting her identity with terms like “queen” and “empress” while simultaneously rejecting the role of the powerless and dependent old woman imposed on her. Moreover, by presenting the aging woman as a “queen” and “empress,” Laurence challenges the Western cultural tendency to associate nature with femininity, submissiveness, and withdrawal and aligns herself with Canadian women writers of the time who present “not a simplistic vision of a withdrawal into nature, but a plea for a fresh understanding of a ravished and misunderstood human landscape” (Grace 2013: 56). Laurence’s text calls for a deeper and respectful understanding of the natural world, one that not only acknowledges the full agency of women across all ages but also seeks a more equitable and sustainable relationship between humans and the nonhuman environment.

However untypical, Hagar can be considered a romantic heroine because she must go on a quest into the wilderness, only to return healed and transformed. The wilderness, often perceived as “the place of exile” (Garrard 2004: 61), serves as a metaphor for the challenges of aging and the need for personal transformation. Hagar effectively exiles herself from her former life and confronts the limitations of her agency. In this self-imposed exile, Hagar repeatedly recalls John Keats’s poem “Meg Merrilies” (1818), drawing from English Romantic folklore and telling the story of an old Gypsy woman living a hard but free life in the wilderness. Keats celebrates and romanticizes Meg’s bravery and compares her to Queen Margaret; just as Hagar, with her hair adorned with glittery June bugs, likens herself to an empress and a queen. Hagar sees herself as a nomad wandering in the wilderness, identifying with Meg; both are aged and lonely, often hungry and thirsty, yet dignified women embodying strong characters and free spirits.

While Laurence clearly alludes to the Romantic tradition of idealizing the untamed wilderness, she also undermines it through a touch of irony: the pivotal



moment of Hagar's presentation in the forest "courtroom" and reconciliation with the natural world, as described above, occurs when she seeks a shelter to relieve herself or, in other words, to answer the call of nature – a situation that is supremely natural, yet not entirely dignified (1964: 185–186). Despite this irony, Hagar's experience in the "green world" allows her to temporarily escape the constraints of aging, feeling alive and free. Nature becomes a source of comfort for Hagar, fostering a sense of connection and belonging. Significantly, the wilderness Hagar connects with is represented by the abandoned fish cannery on the coast – a space bearing traces of human activity yet becoming gradually reabsorbed into its natural surroundings. By coming to terms with nature, Hagar distances herself from her former value system – and virtually also from the whole Pioneer myth of heroic settlers who conquered and tamed the wilderness to build a new society. Just as the abandoned cannery symbolizes the transience of human attempts to exert mastery over the wilderness, Hagar's personal transformation involves surrendering the impulse to remake her surroundings. Instead, she opens herself up to being reshaped.

Hagar has spent her entire life trying to see herself through the judgmental eyes of others, assessing and identifying herself with the houses she lived in – structures that formed her outer shell. Thus, her transformation lies in accepting herself as an integral part of nature. This shift is significant because by acknowledging herself as part of a nonhuman environment, Hagar breaks through the "wall of separation" (Chakrabarty 2012: 10) between the cultural and the natural. In Hagar's transformation, the prevalent Western perception of nature as "other," mostly seen either as a romantic world beyond civilization or as a resource to be dominated, controlled, and exploited for human benefit, is challenged. According to Schultz (2002), "connectedness," "caring," and "commitment" are the essential elements of an individual's inclusion in the natural environment. This means that individuals are willing "to invest time and resources" in acting in nature's best interests only if they have developed an "emotional affinity" with nature and see themselves as part of the natural world (Schultz 2002: 68-69). Haq et al. (2007: 15) suggest that the willingness to implement new habits and discard old ones in favour of environmental protection largely depends on whether the individual considers climate change a natural process or a process caused or accelerated by human activity. Hence, adopting the perspective of humans as part of the natural environment can not only help understand the impacts of human actions on the environment but also promote a sense of responsibility and accountability for the health and well-being of the nonhuman world.

## **The Power of Anger**

In her essay "A Place to Stand On" (1983: 17), Margaret Laurence writes about the relationship between anger and the ability to survive, depicting Hagar and her generation as individuals "willing to show anger" yet also as "great survivors." Laurence defines survival not merely as the ability "to go on living" but as the capacity "to change" and adapt to new circumstances (1983: 18). Throughout the



novel, Hagar experiences feelings of frustration, anger, and resentment as she confronts the disempowerment and limitations that accompany the process of aging. These emotions frequently act as driving forces behind Hagar's endeavours to maintain autonomy and dignity. Her anger becomes the impulse for action, emerging as an ultimate and necessary element in Hagar's transformative journey. Hence, in a broader context, anger can be considered a beneficial element in the process of transformation and survival, particularly for older individuals facing challenges related to disengaging from roles and identities they previously occupied, as well as navigating a rapidly changing society and world around them. Laurence's exploration shows the role of anger as a trigger for positive change and resilience in the face of adversity.

While anger is conventionally perceived as a negative emotion (Tomkins 1963: 687), recent scholarship acknowledges its potential positive functions in the context of aging and societal transformation. According to Gilbert (2001: 563), anger plays a crucial role in alleviating the emotional overload associated with a change and transitions in life roles, while Greer (1999: 4) views anger as a bonding element that can catalyze societal change. Woodward (2009: 7) characterizes anger as both a "personal" and "political" emotion that "discloses the unequal relations of power." Fegitz (2022: 2) sees "female anger in older age as key to feminist engagement and political mobilization," driving positive cultural shifts. If the anger that often arises in response to a lack of control in later life can be transformed into a positive driving force at the individual level, then broader manifestations of societal anger could potentially serve as a unifying element. This reframing of anger recognizes its potential not only for personal empowerment but also as an impetus for cultivating mutual understanding across generations and a force for positive change on a broader societal scale.

In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar engages in numerous battles throughout her life to assert her independence, but the crucial struggle emerges at the end of her life, evolving into a clash between two generations. As Davis (2017: 76) notes, Hagar's father, a self-made businessman, tends to consider Hagar his possession, a commodity to be traded. If young Hagar is perceived as her father's property, then the elderly Hagar experiences a form of colonization by her son. Marvin and his wife live in Hagar's house, thus effectively occupying her territory, and they also assume control over her finances. Hagar realizes that relying on Marvin and Doris for support and care translates to a relinquishment of power within her own home: "My things are all around me. Marvin and Doris think of them as theirs, theirs to keep or sell, as they choose, just as they regard the house as theirs, squatters' right after these years of occupation" (1964: 55). Within this framework, Hagar perceives Marvin and Doris as colonizers who have taken control of her "territory" and her resources. Not only is Hagar excluded from financial matters, but she also finds herself disregarded in conversations. Hagar notices that Marvin and Doris often talk "as though [she] weren't here, as though [she] were a full gunnysack they dragged from the floor" (1964: 30). She is also urged to see a priest, despite her lack of interest. In other words, decisions are made without her input, and Hagar becomes a passive observer in matters that directly impact her life.

The metaphorical framework of the colonizer and the colonized illustrates the profound generational gap between Hagar and her son and daughter-in-law. Marvin and Doris have provided care for Hagar over the last seventeen years, and their decision to sell the house primarily arises from their own advancing age – both being in their sixties – and Doris’s deteriorating health. Hagar, however, experiences a growing sense of exclusion within the household, feeling that Marvin and Doris are “united” against her. Fearing eviction and “no longer certain of [her] rights,” Hagar contemplates seeking legal advice (1964: 72). Yet, even if she could find a lawyer and manage to make an appointment, she does not have the money to hire one. Hagar’s vulnerability intensifies as she realizes her inability to stop the planned sale of her house. Terrified at the prospect of moving to a nursing home and feeling cornered, Hagar sees escape as her only option. The theme of late-life rebellion and escape by older women is not unique to Hagar’s story; in Canadian literature, it is also explored in Constance Beresford-Howe’s *The Book of Eve* (1973), Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), or Joan Barfoot’s *Exit Lines* (2008). This thematic exploration collectively highlights the resilience and agency of older women, challenging pervasive stereotypes that depict aging as a period of submissiveness and withdrawal from societal engagement.

Hagar is not only powerless against the decisions of her relatives but also vulnerable to attacks from her deteriorating body, over which she often loses control. During her escape, she struggles with the physical challenge of climbing a wooded hill:

And then I do fall. My feet slip, both together, on a clump of wet moss, and I’m down. My elbows are skinned on rough bark, and blood seeps onto my snagged stockings from the scratches on my legs. Under my ribs the pain drums and I can hear the uneven accompaniment of my heart. I can’t move. I can’t rise. I’m stuck here like an overturned ladybug, frantically waving to summon help that won’t come. (1964: 186)

When feeling vulnerable and exposed, Hagar experiences disorientation and loss of control. Despite her aching body, the worst part for her is feeling “helpless” (1964: 186). Just as an “overturned ladybug” struggles to right itself, Hagar battles to regain her footing, both literally and figuratively, in the context of aging and mortality. She realizes, however, that she must face this on her own, find the strength, regain her lost balance, and chart a new direction:

I grow enraged ... Perhaps the anger gives me strength, for I clutch a bough, not caring if it’s covered with pins and needles or not, and yank myself up-right. There. There. I knew I could get up alone. I’ve done it. (1964: 186)

Motivated by anger, Hagar manages to muster the strength to stand up again. When translated into action, Hagar’s anger helps her overcome her physical weaknesses and other obstacles on her way. This suggests that anger can serve as a powerful motivator and source of determination, enabling individuals to push themselves to action. Thus, anger can be not only an agent for social change but

also a provider of the emotional resources needed to overcome obstacles and take responsibility.

One of the prevalent stereotypes suggests that older people are generally grumpy and irritable, quick to anger. Woodward (2009: 75) contends that anger in older people can be “a sign of moral outrage at social injustice and at being denied the right to participate fully in society.” She rejects “the cultural reflex” that labels older individuals as weak and “lacking in judgement” and, therefore they should detach from society (Woodward 2009: 76). Some older people then sometimes adopt grumpiness as a strategic form of resistance, challenging societal norms that dictate happiness and positivity as the only “correct” way of aging.<sup>5</sup> This strategy can also help to defend against potential manifestations of ageism. In Hagar’s case, too, anger is often tied to feelings of frustration and helplessness as she struggles to cope with the loss of autonomy and the challenges brought on by aging. This visceral emotion stems from a sense of injustice, frustration, and a fervent desire for change and agency. Her anger represents the catalyzing spark that drives Hagar to assert her independence and, in a broader context, transcends diminishing societal narratives about older people. In Laurence’s portrayal of Hagar, her anger emerges not as mere grumpiness but as a legitimate reaction emblematic of older individuals’ resistance to unjust power dynamics.

As Hagar ages, she confronts not only physical limitations but also experiences cognitive impairment, marked by moments of forgetfulness and confusion. This vulnerability becomes a significant source of anxiety for Hagar, contributing to feelings of isolation and frustration, often expressed outwardly as anger. The necessity to rely on others for assistance clashes with Hagar’s inherently independent nature. Similarly, societal narratives that often render aging populations burdensome and problematic, threatening to overwhelm resources, can breed intergenerational resentments. This “apocalyptic” framing criticized by Garrard (2004: 106-107) risks diminishing the agency and autonomy of older populations and can foster “a delusive search for culprits” by conflating complex issues into a singular “imminent crisis.” Just as Hagar is exasperated at being reduced to a state of dependency, some retired individuals, those with compromised health, or people with disabilities may find themselves dependent on the social system, which is sustained mainly by the economically productive population. For Hagar and others coping with the indignities of aging, feeling reduced to a passive burden can understandably provoke anger as a reassertion of personhood. Laurence’s depiction of Hagar’s cognitive vulnerabilities illustrates how easily such sweeping societal rhetoric about aging may incite negative emotions and contribute to intergenerational tensions.

Hagar engages in numerous battles throughout her life to assert her independence, but the crucial struggle emerges when her escape evolves into a clash between generations. Tensions between age groups sometimes manifest as anger, stemming from divergent values, beliefs, and life experiences and exacerbated by conflicts over resources and power. This anger and resentment can become destructive if left unresolved. Margaret Atwood’s short story “Torching the Dusties” (2014) depicts how such intergenerational anger can escalate into violence when

younger generations believe that older people have contributed to the current environmental problems through their irresponsible and unsustainable attitudes, thus bequeathing to future generations a less habitable world with depleted resources. The elderly in retirement homes are mercilessly attacked by youth mobs rioting with the singular aim of removing this perceived social burden and making way for the next generation. Atwood's short story can be perceived as a cautionary vision of the dangerous endpoint when ageist anger devolves into hatred – a breakdown of mutual understanding across generations.

In stark contrast, the Raging Grannies activist movement exemplifies how the same wellspring of anger can be channelled as a unifying force for positive change. As Roy (2007: 163) describes, these feminist activists, drawing attention also to environmental issues, embody “a contemporary form of collective resistance” and “challenge stereotypes and authorities, expand our understanding of aging, and transform despair and anger through the use of humour and creativity.” The Raging Grannies are a notable example of how anger and frustration can trigger positive social change and transform the emotive energy of anger into empowering solidarity across age cohorts. Laurence's exploration of Hagar's transformative journey navigates between these poles. Through Hagar's stubborn, relentless assertion of her personality in the face of marginalizing forces, her anger emerges as a catalyzing source of resilience and personal rebirth.

### **A Shift in Perspective**

Before the commencement of the novel, Laurence incorporates a couplet from a 1951 poem by Dylan Thomas, setting the stage for Hagar's perspective on aging and mortality:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (1964: np)

Even in the final period of her life, Hagar retains significant energy that she draws not only from memories but also from powerful emotions, such as anger and rage. Raised in the pioneer tradition, Hagar believes that one must fight in every situation and perceives reconciliation as a sign of weakness. Therefore, when her brother Matt dies, Hagar finds it more difficult to accept his lack of resistance to death than the fact of his passing: “He didn't fight his death ... He didn't struggle to breathe, or try to hang on. He let himself slip away ... Why hadn't he writhed, cursed, at least grappled with the thing?” (1964: 57) Hagar vehemently refuses passive surrender to death in a nursing home, demonstrating her determination and refusal to embrace her mortality quietly. Despite her deteriorating physical and mental health, she remains determined and resolute and resists capitulation. Rage is Hagar's response to powerlessness in the face of mortality.

When Hagar is discovered in her refuge within the fish cannery, her exhaustion leads to hospitalization in a ward populated by women from diverse backgrounds, some speaking foreign languages. This microcosm, where she initially

feels “like an exhibition in a museum” (1964: 249), poses a challenge for Hagar – a white settler woman whose sense of superiority and entitlement has long shaped her worldview and relationships with others. However, she soon realizes that her tenacious adherence to racial and class prejudices, pride, and settler supremacy, which involves looking down upon working-class people, Indigenous people, or anyone deemed “other,” is no longer relevant. Initially resistant to the communal living arrangement, Hagar gradually adapts and begins to feel a sense of belonging. Alongside the other women in the ward, they “submit themselves to communal exchange between and among them” (Davis 2017: 89). The heterogeneous group of women living together in the hospital room forms a “kinship,” a concept that has evolved from a strictly biogenetic understanding to today’s perception emphasizing diversity (Kamboureli 2014: 18). This inclusive concept of kinship suggests “reconfigurations of communities” and reflects the idea that relationships and bonds can be forged based on shared experiences, perspectives, and values (Kamboureli 2014: 21). Hagar’s integration into this kinship marks Laurence’s promotion of a departure from colonial individualism and superiority, advocating for the importance of a diverse community, mutual understanding, and cooperation.

The connection between Hagar’s pride and her experiences in the hospital ward underscores the overarching theme of transformation and shows that personal growth and learning can occur even in the later stages of life. Like Meg in Keats’ poem, who weaves grass mats and gives them to the poor, Hagar selflessly assists women in the hospital community. Commenting on Hagar’s transformation, Manning (1993: 472-473) points out not only the “renewal of a spirit of compassion and concern for others which has been dormant in Hagar” but, above all, highlights “her new awareness of the significance of these actions.” Hagar realizes that despite her prolonged struggle for independence, she is intricately connected to the various communities she has lived in. Although she has often felt like an outsider, she is deeply embedded in them. A significant moment occurs when Hagar unselfishly helps her young roommate by handing her a bedpan. For the weakened and ill Hagar, this is not only an extraordinary physical achievement but also a mental and personal shift: “There. I’m there. I knew I could. And now I wonder if I’ve done it for her or for myself. No matter. I’m here, and carrying what she needs.” (1964: 294). The nurse, who enters just as Hagar returns to bed, reprimands her sharply and leaves the room with a scandalized expression. In response, a ninety-year-old woman and a seventeen-year-old girl, seemingly worlds apart, share a burst of laughter. Hagar reflects on this moment: “Convulsed with our paining laughter, we bellow and wheeze. And then we peacefully sleep” (1964: 295). This shared laughter, unthinkable just a few days prior, underscores the importance of a community for an individual and opens up the possibility of intergenerational cooperation.

Expanding on Chakrabarty’s conception of three different historical timescales,<sup>6</sup> Woodward (2022: 201) introduces the notion of “generational time.” This idea relates to our sense of being part of a larger sequence of generations, instilling a sense of responsibility and obligation to those who came before us and those who will come after us. By writing the aging protagonist into a story of transfor-

mation, Laurence incorporates a sense of interdependence into Hagar's experience, which spans both human-nature and intergeneration realms. Through the interaction between Hagar and her young roommate, Sandra Wong, Laurence highlights the interconnectedness of histories and the necessity for cooperation between generations. This is exemplified through the revelation that Hagar had purchased the house where she lived with Marvin and Doris with money bequeathed to her by Mr. Oatley, for whom she had worked as a housekeeper. Mr. Oatley, involved in the illegal importation of Chinese women to Canada, may have indirectly contributed to Sandra's family history. Hagar realizes that Sandra may have been the granddaughter of one of the Chinese women that Mr. Oatley smuggled into Canada:

My absurd formality with this child is caused by my sudden certainty that she is the grand-daughter of one of the smallfoot-bound women whom Mr. Oatley smuggled in, when oriental wives were frowned upon, in the hazardous hold of his false-bottomed boats. Maybe I owe my house to her grandmother's passage money. There's a thought." (1964: 280)

Feeling indebted to Sandra, Hagar transcends her self-centeredness and her frail and ailing body to assist her, the act that Davis (2017: 89) reads as "a reparative moment ... that reaches back through the generations." Laurence emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and reconciling with the interconnectedness of history, fostering intergenerational understanding and cooperation for a more equitable and sustainable future. Hagar's death, viewed by Davis (2017: 76) as "a transition ... from one generation to the next" rather than as termination, underscores the continuity of generations. Hagar's story indeed transcends her lifetime, encapsulating the stories of those before her and, in the implied stories of her grandchildren, those after.

The novel's often-quoted passage captures Hagar's realization of the impact of her pride on her relationships:

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 with me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. (1964: 285-286).

Hagar's pride is a barrier to her participation in the community and establishing meaningful connections with others. Consequently, her transformation involves the need to "reconcile her contemporary individualism with her communal past to imagine an alternative future" (Dudek 2005: 248). Through acknowledging past mistakes and seeking reconciliation, Hagar releases her metaphorical "chains" and envisions a different future for herself and those around her. This personal transformation reflects a broader societal issue, highlighting the negative consequences of individualism and pride as impediments to connection and understanding. These figurative "chains" hinder finding common ground and working towards shared goals within human communities and our relationships with the natural world. As Schultz (2002: 74) contends, "the only sure path to



sustainability is through inclusion – individuals must believe that they are a part of nature.” Chakrabarty’s concept of humans as a geological force impacting the planet reinforces this idea, suggesting that “humans are now part of the natural history of the planet” (2012: 9-10). This not only implies direct human contribution to climate change but also blurs the traditional boundary between human and nonhuman worlds. Just as Hagar’s journey involves reconciling her individualism with her communal roots, Chakrabarty’s notion of “collective existence” (2012: 13) posits that humans must integrate into nature and actually participate in its processes. By acknowledging our role as part of the Earth’s systems, rather than separate from them, the concept of identity expands from the personal to the collective entity – a shared existence with the natural world. Hagar’s transformation can be seen as a microcosm of this broader shift in perspective, where overcoming individualism and embracing community is necessary not just for human connections but for our collective existence within the planet’s ecosystems.

While Hagar has undergone significant transformation and reframed her worldview, it is important to note that certain fundamental aspects of her personality have persisted. Her transformation, however, goes beyond her performing a couple of selfless deeds; rather, it signifies Hagar’s profound shift in perception regarding the world and her place within it. Initially fiercely protective of her reputation and sense of self-worth, she gradually learns to release her pride and embrace the needs and feelings of others. Transitioning from viewing herself as separate from both people and the environment, she now perceives herself as an integral part of the community and nature. This transformative journey allows her to discover a sense of peace and acceptance, a pursuit she has sought throughout her life. Hagar’s story thus not only highlights personal growth but also opens up the possibility for a broader societal shift in perspective. It suggests that regardless of age, whether considering the age of the individual or humanity as a whole, a change in viewpoint can manifest, offering a glimmer of cautious optimism.

## Conclusion

Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, published nearly sixty years ago, remains relevant today as it reflects many pressing issues. The protagonist, Hagar Shipley, undergoes a profound personal transformation as she confronts the challenges of aging and mortality, with her journey to reconciliation intertwined with her interaction with the natural world. Laurence masterfully blurs the initial binary oppositions of individual versus community, settlers versus “others,” and culture versus nature, revealing their intrinsic interconnectedness and interdependence. As a descendant of Scottish settlers, Hagar firmly believes in her cultural and class superiority. Yet, she also fears societal judgment for deviating from the expected standards of her privileged class. Although Hagar seems unable to communicate effectively with her surroundings or even with herself, her struggle actually represents a search for the appropriate language for self-expression,



which she ultimately discovers in the landscape. Through the transformative power of the natural environment, Laurence not only illustrates Hagar's personal growth but also indicates the broader journey from colonial individualism and superiority toward embracing a diverse community and fostering mutual cooperation.

Laurence's depiction of Hagar's personal transformation through her interaction with the natural world highlights the critical importance of considering cultural perspectives in understanding and addressing environmental and societal concerns. *The Stone Angel* serves as a timeless reminder that it is never too late to reframe thoughts and behavioural patterns, offering hope and inspiration for both individuals and society as a whole. As this article demonstrates, the timeless significance of Laurence's novel lies not only in its exploration of individual personal growth but also in its capacity to inspire societal change. However late in life, Hagar eventually learns to accept herself as a part of nature and community, reframing her self-centred worldview to one that is caring and helpful. Perhaps we need to do the same, reconsider ingrained stereotypes, embrace socio-cultural diversity and overlapping identities, and foster intergenerational cooperation to ensure our collective survival.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The concept of the "green world," as described by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), refers to a natural, idyllic environment separate from human society. It is also a source of vitality, growth, and renewal.
- <sup>2</sup> In *The Bush Garden* (1971: ii), Frye suggests that the question of Canadian identity depends crucially on a particular region a person comes from. According to Frye, identity is "local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture."
- <sup>3</sup> The opening paragraphs of *The Stone Angel*, as well as some other passages I refer to, were analyzed by Denis Cooley in "Antimacassared in the Wilderness: Art and Nature in *The Stone Angel*" (1978) and by W. H. New in "Every Now and Then: Voice and Language in Laurence's *The Stone Angel*" (1982). However, both texts approach the novel from different perspectives than I do in this article: while Cooley focuses on the Jungian nature of the novel, New analyses the use of language that shapes the character of the protagonist and her world.
- <sup>4</sup> In the "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada" (1965), Northrop Frye introduces the concept of the "garrison mentality," which manifests in themes recurrent in Canadian fiction, such as isolation, the establishment of both territorial and social borders, and construction of metaphorical walls against the outside world. Frye sees the fear of the wilderness of Canadian nature as one of the essential components of Canadian identity.
- <sup>5</sup> Jonathan Rauch (2018) proposes the U-shaped model of happiness in his book *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50* (2018). This model suggests that individuals' overall happiness follows a U-shaped curve over their lifetimes, with high levels in early adulthood, a dip during middle age, and an upswing in later life. This theory aligns with the prevalent sociocultural discourse of "happy aging." However, the emphasis on maintaining happiness in later life can create unrealistic expectations, potentially leading to a sense of failure for individuals unable to meet prescribed happiness standards. Additionally, the stereotype of happy aging often neglects challenges like health issues, financial insecurity, and social isolation.

<sup>6</sup> See “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene” (2015)

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PAVLÍNA STUDENÁ is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno. Her doctoral research explores the portrayal of aging in contemporary English Canadian fiction, examining how authors depict aging as a process during which the balance of power is disturbed to challenge prevailing socio-cultural stereotypes that contribute to the fear of aging and the rise of ageist attitudes in society.

Address: Mgr. Bc. Pavlína Studená, Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 60200 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: [pstuden-a@mail.muni.cz](mailto:pstuden-a@mail.muni.cz)]



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