

Intersecting Marginalities: A Feminist and Disability Studies Approach to Margaret Laurence's *the Stone Angel*

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Abstract: Most people read *The Stone Angel* just looking at the feminism stuff, basically seeing Hagar as a really stubborn old lady. But they totally miss the other massive angle here: disability. As Hagar Shipley ages, her physical body breaks down, forcing her to deal with a world that basically treats old, disabled women like helpless children. This paper examines the ways in which feminist concerns and disability intersect throughout Hagar's narrative. The central argument is that Hagar's strong resistance to institutionalization cannot be understood merely as an expression of personal pride. It is a desperate, totally valid fight for bodily autonomy. Hagar's experience clearly shows how society strips power away from women the second they become physically dependent. Looking at her sharp brain trapped in a broken body proves Laurence was trying to completely change how society treats old people.

Keywords: Feminist Theory, Physical Decline, Getting Older, Independence, Hagar, Laurence

Introduction

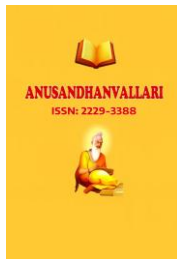
Critics constantly fixate on Hagar's stubborn pride and her inability to express emotion. But reading the text with a focus on physical disability completely alters the narrative. Approaching ninety, Hagar finds her physical form rebelling against her will. The moment this happens, her family immediately shifts their behavior, managing her as a difficult chore rather than a human being. The intersection of physical limitation and gendered expectations becomes unavoidable here. Women already spend their lives navigating male authority. Add physical weakness and getting old to that situation, and it gets infinitely worse. The medical system, and even her own family, try to strip away all of her daily choices.

The main point of this essay is to look closely at how Hagar tries to hold onto her sense of self when her body is basically giving out on her. I want to track how the loss of physical capability directly threatens her feminist independence. The discussion focuses on the tension between a society that marginalizes older people and Hagar's persistent determination to preserve her individual identity. Plus, this paper tries to spot the specific ways she pushes back against medical authority and institutional control. By presenting Hagar's internal perspective and her experience of physical decline, Laurence illustrates the continuing struggle for autonomy when society defines the aging body through notions of impairment and dependency.

Feminism, Aging, and the Disabled Body

In the mid-twentieth century, society essentially defined women entirely by their physical bodies. Society heavily prioritized women who could produce children, maintain their looks, and run a household flawlessly. Consequently, when a woman experiences physical decline and fails to fulfill these roles, the culture at large struggles to find a place for her. Society basically just throws her away. The core premise of disability scholarship highlights that impairments are not merely medical failings but societal ones. Environments and cultural norms are literally constructed to exclude anyone whose body operates outside the expected baseline.

She flatly rejects any assistance because she firmly believes needing care equals failure. As she stubbornly puts it early on, she would rather suffer in secret, thinking, "But I never could say a word, never could bring myself



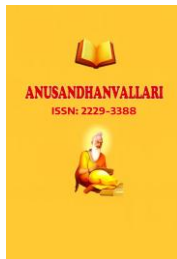
to reach out a hand..." (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 40). Her reluctance to acknowledge her physical limitations ultimately distances her from those who attempt to provide assistance. The Nursing Home as Institutional Control

A significant dimension of the novel's central conflict concerns Silverthreads, the nursing home that Hagar's family considers appropriate for her care. For Hagar, moving there isn't just about getting proper medical care. It is basically a prison sentence. Feminist disability theory argues that institutions like nursing homes often exist specifically to hide elderly and disabled people away from the rest of 'normal' society. Such institutions can restrict everyday autonomy by regulating personal choices concerning food, sleeping routines, clothing, and other aspects of daily life.

Hagar's escape to the abandoned cannery at Shadow Point represents a significant act of resistance against institutional control. She would literally rather sleep on the freezing floor of a ruined building than let doctors and nurses dictate her life. This frantic run for freedom is the ultimate feminist statement of bodily autonomy. She quits playing nice and literally runs away from being locked up. As she furiously tells herself regarding the nursing home, "I can't keep my mouth shut. I never could" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 254). By determining for herself where she will live and sleep, Hagar reasserts the personal agency that social structures frequently deny to disabled women. The Stone Angel Metaphor

The stone angel in the cemetery provides a powerful symbolic representation of Hagar's character. At the emotional level, the statue reflects Hagar's psychological rigidity and resistance to emotional vulnerability. The narrator actually describes the statue beautifully: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand... Summer and winter she viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 3). Hagar develops an emotional hardness as a means of enduring her difficult marriage to Bram and the challenges of her circumstances. But on a physical level, the statue also perfectly mirrors her disabled, aging body. Just like the statue is frozen in place, blind, and slowly degrading in the weather, Hagar's physical body is stiffening up and failing her. The irony lies in the fact that Hagar has spent her life cultivating an image of strength and immovability, only to find herself increasingly constrained by the physical limitations of her aging body. Her fierce drive for independence is precisely what isolated her, but now her physical paralysis is forcing her to realize she can't survive alone. She is totally trapped inside a shell that won't do what she tells it to anymore. Laurence absolutely nails how terrifying it is to have a perfectly sharp, critical mind trapped inside a body that is shutting down.

Another significant difficulty Hagar encounters is the manner in which the medical system reduces her to an object of clinical management. When she eventually ends up in the public ward of the hospital, all of her privacy disappears instantly. Feminist scholarship has long examined the tendency of medical institutions to treat women's bodies as objects requiring regulation rather than recognizing patients as active participants in decisions concerning their own care. Mix in old age, and the doctors essentially treat her like a broken machine on an assembly line. The medical staff examine her, administer medication with limited explanation, and frequently speak over her, thereby diminishing her participation in her own treatment. This makes her realize how completely trapped she has become by her own body, later confessing that "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 292). The hospital gown becomes a tangible symbol of Hagar's loss of dignity and personal identity within the medical environment. Stripped of her own clothes, she loses the last little bit of visual identity she had left. Disability scholars note that hospitals often strip away personal identity to make patients easier to control. Hagar hates this intensely. Although Hagar recognizes her need for medical treatment, she resents the perceived loss of dignity that accompanies institutional care. Her sharp, sarcastic internal thoughts during these hospital scenes show a woman desperately trying to hold onto her mind while doctors reduce her entire existence to failing organs and bodily fluids.



Hagar's escape to Shadow Point is particularly significant for understanding her continuing struggle for autonomy. It's not just a casual trip; it's a frantic, physically agonizing journey for someone in her condition. Running away to an abandoned, rotting cannery in the woods is incredibly dangerous for an elderly disabled woman, but that just highlights how desperate she is to avoid the nursing home. The wilderness setting is particularly significant in this context. By taking her physically weakened body into the wilderness, Hagar asserts her continuing capacity to exercise personal agency.

During this episode, Hagar's physical limitations become especially pronounced. She struggles with basic things like getting water, staying warm, and moving around the ruined building. Despite the considerable physical discomfort she experiences, her presence at Shadow Point provides Hagar with a sense of freedom and psychological relief. At Shadow Point, she is once again able to make decisions independently, despite the considerable risks involved. From a disability perspective, this scene is crucial. The episode suggests that institutional safety may not necessarily correspond to an individual's understanding of autonomy, dignity, and meaningful independence. Her willingness to accept physical risk rather than surrender her autonomy can therefore be interpreted as a significant act of feminist resistance to excessive protection and institutional control.

This emphasis on memory can be closely associated with the concerns of feminist disability theory. When a patriarchal society tries to erase an older woman by ignoring her or locking her away, remembering your own history is a radical act of defiance. Her internal monologue is incredibly sharp, unforgiving, and deeply observant. Even when she is lying completely still and unable to speak clearly to the nurses, her mind is racing. She uses her memories to mentally escape the confines of her failing body and the suffocating control of her family. She looks back at her life and realizes the massive cost of her emotional walls, noting, "Now we are free to come and go as we please, not in sorrow but in laughter" (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 21). By preserving her personal history through memory, Hagar resists being defined solely by her present physical limitations. Accepting Vulnerability

By eventually accepting assistance, Hagar begins to reconsider the patriarchal ideal that defines complete self-reliance as the only legitimate form of independence. She gradually recognizes her own worth and demonstrates that personal dignity can be preserved even under conditions of substantial dependence on medical care. This demonstrates a very advanced and thoughtful approach to understanding who she is. She doesn't try to find a perfect, easy fix. Instead, she realizes that being actually free means you have to let your guard down sometimes, coming to the beautiful realization: "She was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 3).

Conclusion

Reading Hagar through the combined perspectives of feminism and disability studies offers a substantially different interpretation of her character. Hagar should not be understood merely as an embittered elderly woman who seeks to challenge or frustrate her family. Rather, she resists a social system that seeks to institutionalize her in response to her declining mobility.

This demonstrates that Laurence's protagonists possess greater psychological and social complexity than their symbolic functions alone might suggest. Hagar's experience demonstrates that the feminist struggle for bodily autonomy continues even as women age or experience declining physical mobility. Aging can therefore be understood as a gradual and deeply personal process through which individuals confront and reconsider socially constructed ideals of physical perfection. Her writing is still a really important look at what it actually takes for an elderly woman to hold onto her identity in a world that tries to keep disabled women small and quiet.

Hagar's final days reveal a discernible process of personal transformation. She gradually moves from a destructive resistance to bodily decline toward a more reflective acceptance of interdependence. The novel

demonstrates that forms of discrimination and marginalization do not always manifest through overt acts of violence; rather, they can become embedded in ordinary daily interactions, such as family members speaking over Hagar or medical professionals making decisions without consulting her.

Future research could further develop this discussion by incorporating contemporary perspectives from feminist disability studies, like looking closer at how medical institutions specifically target aging women of different class backgrounds. Doing that would definitely pull back the curtain on how toxic her hometown really was. Hagar's death leaves the novel open to continued critical interpretation and sustained scholarly discussion. Her experience ultimately suggests that strength does not necessarily require complete self-reliance; rather, it involves preserving one's sense of identity while acknowledging the need for others.

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