

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Stone Angel

by

### Margaret Laurence

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### Book Information

Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel  
Quiz Number: 8121  
Bantam Books, 1964  
ISBN 0-7710-9989-4; LCCN  
316 Pages  
Book Level: 4.8  
Interest Level: UG

At 90, Hagar Shipley looks back at her life--a girlhood dominated by her father, a bad marriage, and her relationship with her sons.

**Topics:** Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Character Traits, Self Improvement; Community Life, Freedoms; Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Sons; People, Pioneers/Settlers

### Main Characters

Arlene Simmons Lottie and Telford's daughter, John's girlfriend  
Auntie Doll a widow who lived with Hagar's family after Hagar's mother's death  
Brampton Shipley Hagar's husband  
Charlotte Tappen Hagar's childhood friend  
Doctor Corby Hagar's physician  
Doris Marvin's wife  
Elva Jardine a resident of Hagar's hospital ward  
Hagar a 90 year-old woman who, in the process of dying, looks back on her life  
Hagar's father a Scottish immigrant who settled on the Canadian plains  
Jess and Gladys Bram's daughters from his first marriage  
John Hagar's son, who dies in a train/truck crash  
Lottie Drieser Hagar's peer, an illegitimate girl  
Marvin Hagar's son, who cares for her in her old age  
Matt and Dan Hagar's brothers  
Mr. Oatley Hagar's employer  
Mr. Troy minister of Marvin and Doris's church  
Mrs. Steiner resident of the Silverthreads nursing home

Murray Lees a man who talks with Hagar in the abandoned cannery  
Sandra Wong Hagar's roommate in the hospital  
Steven Hagar's grandson, who visits her in the hospital  
Telford Simmons Hagar's peer, who marries Lottie Drieser  
Tina Hagar's granddaughter

### Vocabulary

**approbation** official approval or praise  
**malingering** pretending to be ill to avoid work  
**sanctimonious** pretending to be holy

### Synopsis

Hagar is a 90-year-old woman who, while dying, achieves insight into herself as she recalls her life.

Hagar grew up on the prairie of Canada in the late 1800s. Her mother died in childbirth and her father, a Scottish immigrant, was very strict. When her brother was dying of pneumonia after falling through the ice, Hagar was unable to bring herself to comfort him in his delirium by pretending to be his mother. After spending two years out East at school, Hagar returned to her hometown, Manawaka, wanting to be a teacher. Instead, she was coerced by her father into staying home to be hostess to his frequent guests. Shortly, she married Brampton Shipley, a coarse widower fourteen years older than she.

Their sexual relationship was the only aspect of their marriage that appeared positive, and Hagar was unable to tell him that she enjoyed it. There was little communication in the marriage. They had two children, Marvin and John. Although Hagar loved John, she did not demonstrate love to either boy.

Marvin served in World War I and then moved away permanently. Hagar left Bram and, with John, took a job as a housekeeper on the coast. When John grew up, he returned to care for his ill father. Hagar returned shortly before her husband died, but he did not seem to know her and there was no

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reconciliation. She stayed on with John and interfered with his relationship with a young woman. John and the girl were killed in a train/truck accident.

In the current-day story, Hagar at first lives with her son Marvin and his wife, Doris. Doris finds it difficult to continue caring for Hagar, and they want her to move to a nursing home. Hagar resists. She runs away and spends a couple of nights in a deserted fish cannery, where she ends up telling a stranger John's story. When she is found and returned to the hospital, where she will soon die, she begins to think more kindly about her husband and to open up to the people around her, including Marvin. She realizes that fear and pride led her to be alone all her life and prevented her from being free.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Why did Hagar leave Bram and take a job as a housekeeper on the coast? Describe the events that immediately preceded her decision.

*Several events occurred that made Hagar realize the miserable state of her life and marriage with Bram. She and John delivered eggs to Lottie's family--whom Hagar had previously considered herself superior to--and were treated like lower-class citizens. Next, she looked in the mirror in the restroom and realized she looked poor. Finally, when she went to the store to get some new clothes, she overheard Bram asking for day-old doughnuts and lemon extract.*

#### Literary Analysis

What adjectives could be used to describe Hagar as a young woman, an old woman, and immediately preceding her death? Is she a likeable character? Why or why not?

*As a young woman, Hagar could be called stern, opinionated, inhibited, judgmental, and hard. As an old woman prior to her self-discovery, she could be considered the above plus difficult, cantankerous, and forgetful. Following her self-discovery, she might be described as softer, more loving, and less judgmental.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

In her last conversation with Marvin, Hagar told him he had been a better son to her than John. Yet, she acknowledged to herself that her statement was a lie. Why did Hagar lie to Marvin?

*She had realized that she did not connect or communicate well with her loved ones all her life. She knew she was going to die and wanted to make Marvin happy before she did.*

#### Constructing Meaning

The stone angel is a metaphor (an implied comparison between two unlike objects) for Hagar. In what way was Hagar a stone angel for most of her life, and how did she change before she died? Provide some examples that prove she changed.

*For most of her life, Hagar was a sightless, cold person, like the stone angel with blank eyeballs that marked her mother's grave. She was unable to go beyond her fear and pride to reveal herself to people, accept people for who they are, and communicate love for them. She gained insight into herself before she died and was able to reach out, no longer a sightless stone angel. Some examples of her change include getting the bedpan for Sandra and her conversation with Marvin.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Lottie's family played an important role in the story, from

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Hagar's first recollections of Lottie as a child, to the conversation Hagar overheard between her father and Lottie's mother, to the comparison of Lottie and Hagar's roles as adults, to John and Arlene's relationship. Have students write an essay tracing the relationships between Hagar's and Lottie's families and describing the purposes Lottie's family serves in the story.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** A subplot of *The Stone Angel* is that of Hagar resisting her son and his wife's efforts to persuade her to enter a nursing home. Probably quite a few students have grandparents who are in nursing homes. Hold a class discussion about this trend in our culture and the pros and cons of living in a nursing home. Ask if any of their families have had difficulties deciding where their elderly relatives should live.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** *The Stone Angel* is told in the first person from Hagar's point of view. Using Hagar's point of view is essential to allow for the flashbacks that eventually provide Hagar with insights into her life. To help the students understand the importance of point of view, ask them to choose a scene from the story and rewrite it from another character's point of view. Some choices include Marvin, Doris, Sandra, and Mr. Lees. Discuss how different the story would be if written from a different point of view.

**Responding to Literature** Hagar and Bram's marriage was one of the vehicles the author used to describe Hagar's difficulties in relating to other people. The author juxtaposes it with Arlene and John's relationship. Hold a class discussion about these two relationships. Ask the class to identify their differences and their positive and negative qualities. Talk about the qualities that are important to a successful relationship.