

MORAL VISION IN THE STONE ANGEL

Margaret Gail Osachoff

Several critics — Anne Thompson, Frank Pesando, John Baxter, and Nancy Bailey — have seen the scene in the Manawaka dump where Lottie kills the newly-hatched chicks while Hagar watches as central to an understanding of Hagar and of the moral vision of *The Stone Angel*. They make the connection, which Hagar herself suggests, between this scene and the one where she and Lottie are trying to prevent the marriage of their children, John and Arlene, but neglect to make other connections. The scene in the town dump, however, is more important than is generally seen, and a close analysis of the scene and of the connections that exist between it and other scenes clarifies its meaning and the meaning of the whole novel. Such an examination reveals that Margaret Laurence's moral vision is more complex and her artistry more subtle than has been suspected.

I

Anne Thompson recognizes the connection between the killing of the chicks in the town dump and the much later deaths of John and Arlene. She says that Hagar and Lottie "connive against the life urge of their children"¹ and that "often the natural life forces and desires of the young are snuffed out by their pragmatic elders."² Thompson sees the Manawaka dump as "a sulphurous hell in which the life force, embodied in the frail newborn chicks, can only shrink to nothingness. And Lottie, with her little black-patent leather shoes, stamps out life while Hagar looks on."³ She goes on:

It is no accident that Hagar, much more imaginative than Lottie, makes the connection between the horrors of that day at the dump and the plot against their children. The same principle is at work. The helpless chicks in the dump — their children trying to eke out their existence on the drought-stricken prairies — they refuse to permit the struggle. They have pitted their wits

¹Anne Thompson, "The Wilderness of Pride: Form and Image in *The Stone Angel*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, No. 15 (1975), p. 106.

²Thompson, p. 107. ³Thompson, p. 107.

against God. Life has denied life. Than such there can be no more barren wilderness. The image of fire and brimstone associated with the dump implies the nature of their crime. John's death comes as a mercy and Bram's comment on Marvin's departure from the farm applies equally to his second son. "He'll be as well away."⁴

Thompson sees the two scenes as strictly parallel but does not connect them to any other scenes in the novel. Frank Pesando makes the same connection:

Lottie is still capable of the act. In this second instance their children, Arlene and John, are likened to starving creatures and the prairie that surrounds them is compared to the wasteland which had surrounded the chickens. Once again Lottie will crush the creatures while Hagar watches. The desire to ruin a love affair which they view as impractical and unsightly is merely an extension of the desire to destroy the mutilated chickens, whose very existence seem to threaten. The crippled birds become crippled children.⁵

Like Thompson, John Baxter observes that Hagar's and Lottie's actions are a denial of life and stresses "the theme of the intrusive will."⁶ By comparing *The Stone Angel* to *King Lear*, Baxter tries to prove that Hagar does not have a "proper attitude toward death"⁷: "The recognition that the moment of death is not in human hands may be scarcely consoling, but representing the limits of human consciousness, it does leave human beings free to devote themselves to what is in their hands, the proper safeguarding of life."⁸ He sees Murray Lees as Hagar's guide "implicitly warning her against the danger of arrogantly meddling in those aspects of human affairs beyond the provenance of one individual human will."⁹ He claims that John's and Arlene's relationship is irresponsible and that because of this Hagar is not "entirely wrong" in interfering. And yet her interference is a sign of failure on her part; her "failure at the moment of crisis in her relationship with her son, as well as the failure of each of the others most immediately involved, Lottie,

⁴Thompson, p. 107.

⁵Frank Pesando, "In a Nameless Land: The use of Apocalyptic Mythology in the Writings of Margaret Laurence," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 3, No. 1 (Winter 1973), 53.

⁶John Baxter, "The Stone Angel: Shakesperian Bearings," *The Compass*, 1, No. 1 (August 1977), 13.

⁷Baxter, p. 4.

⁸Baxter, p. 6.

⁹Baxter, p. 7.

Arlene, John, is a failure in the exercise of the full and responsible imagination."¹⁰ Baxter says, too, that Margaret Laurence is "good at exposing the pretense of goodwill, the pretense of disinterested action that is, in fact, a monstrous egotism parading as unselfishness."¹¹ He interprets the connection between the two scenes as one that involves a judgement against mercy-killing:

Hagar recoils from the disaster of their [John's and Arlene's] deaths, which so clearly mock all her calculations . . . just as she had recoiled years earlier, to her mortification, from Lottie's act of mercy-killing. Mercy-killing is the supreme case of covering impure motives with the odour of sanctity. It allows the will perfect power over another living creature while excusing a very imperfect knowledge of cause and consequence by claiming that the deed is done solely for the sake of the thing killed. When Hagar recollects Lottie's initial act of killing the chicks, she comments wisely, "I am less certain than I was then that she did it entirely for their sake. I am not sorry now that I did not speed them" (p. 28). And then, when she and Lottie conclude their conspiracy to separate John and Arlene she ominously recalls the event once more (p. 213), without, however, sufficiently pondering its bearing on her present action.¹²

The pointing out of the importance of the motive here is helpful, as is Nancy Bailey's observation that Hagar projects her "shadow" onto Lottie and onto her dead mother. According to Bailey, Hagar represses this part of herself with damaging results:

Only in retrospect does Hagar see how much she resembles her father and what a price she has paid for denying the totality of her nature. Her refusal to join Lottie in killing the new chicks at the dump can be interpreted as the rebellion of her unconscious against the destruction of the fertility symbol. Even though she remembers the incident later in life and is convinced that her reaction was right, she has no awareness that in this solitary incident she has revealed her truest personality.¹³

From the remarks of these four critics, it is evident that there is an accepted pattern of interpretation for this scene, but it is one that can bear closer examination because it does not take into account the whole structure of the novel.

¹⁰Baxter, p. 10.

¹¹Baxter, p. 11.

¹²Baxter, pp. 11-12.

¹³Nancy Bailey, "Margaret Laurence, Carl Jung and the Manawaka Women," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2 (Summer 1977), 312.

II

In the town dump several girls see "with a kind of horror that could not be avoided, however much one looked away or scurried on, that some of the eggs had been fertile and hatched in the sun."¹⁴ Horrified, Hagar and all the girls except one would rather turn away and leave the chicks to their fate which, unless someone takes them home and feeds them, is to die a lingering death. They are "feeble, foodless, bloodied and mutilated, prisoned by the weight of broken shells all around them" (p. 27). Such a rescue is not suggested by any of the girls, and may not have been a possible solution. In their squeamishness all they can do is "gawk and retch." There is one girl, however, whose reaction is different. Lottie takes a stick and crushes the skulls of some of the chicks with it, and on others she steps with her patent-leather-shod feet. Then comes the crucial paragraph which combines Hagar's reaction to Lottie's act almost eighty years before and Hagar's present meditation on that act:

It was the only thing to do, a thing I couldn't have done. And yet it troubled me so much that I could not. At the time it stung me worse, I think, that I could not bring myself to kill those creatures than that I could not bring myself to comfort Dan. I did not like to think that Lottie might have more gumption than I, when I knew full well she did not. Why could I not have done it? Squeamishness, I suppose. Certainly not pity. For pity's sake they were put out of their misery, or so I believed then, and still in part believe. But they were an affront to the eyes, as well. I am less certain than I was that she did it entirely for their sake. I am not sorry now that I did not speed them. (p. 28)

That killing the chicks was the right thing to do was Hagar's judgement in the past, since the choice was either to leave the chicks to die a slow death or mercifully to hasten that death. However, it was beyond Hagar to choose the second alternative, and she puts the reason down to squeamishness. It seems, however, that there are reasons beyond that.

Hagar, with her life-long concern with appearances, is bothered by the fact that Lottie is able to do something that she is unable to do. Although critics see in this behaviour a definite (although perhaps unconscious) virtue in Hagar and a cruel callousness in Lottie, this is

¹⁴Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, New Canadian Library (1964; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 27. Further references to the novel are to this edition.

not necessarily the best way to see the difference between the two girls. Hagar has only negative feelings toward Lottie: "Lottie was light as an eggshell herself, and I felt surly toward her littleness and pale fine hair, for I was tall and sturdy and dark and would have liked to be the opposite" (p. 27). The fact that Lottie, an illegitimate child of no social standing and a mere eggshell of a girl, can do what Hagar cannot do would make Hagar suspect, at this point, that she has an inherent weakness of character that she must deny, both to herself and to others, since she looks strong and thinks of herself as a girl of strong character, a girl of "good family" who possesses "backbone." And since Lottie's act shows up Hagar's weakness in front of an audience of her friends, those other "dainty-nosed czarinas," it is especially galling. That her image of herself does not match her actions in this case is important because the scene that fills her memory just before the one of the chicks in the dump is the scene where Hagar is unable to comfort her brother, Dan, when he is dying. Margaret Laurence has Hagar make the connection herself in the paragraph quoted above, but there are words repeated in each scene that strengthen that connection. When Lottie calls on Hagar to do something for the chicks, Hagar can only reply, "I wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole." Lottie's furious answer is: "All right. Don't then" (p. 27). These are exactly the same words that Matt speaks when, after he asks Hagar to pretend to be their dead mother and comfort Dan, Hagar refuses because her image of herself cannot accommodate her playing the role of "that meek woman." Detesting frailty as she does, there is a part of Hagar that wants to sympathize; she wants "above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough" (p. 25). It does indeed seem strange that Hagar's inability to help Dan bothers her less than does her inability to kill the chicks. However, that she couldn't help her dying brother could be seen by a girl who prides herself on backbone as a lesser failing than her inability to help the dying chicks: she could see the first as a failure to pretend to be weak and gentle, although for a good cause, but the second as a failure to show herself the strong person she thinks herself. That her failure in the first case had only one witness, one who will never talk about the event, while her failure in the second had an audience of several girls, who might very well talk, would make a difference to Hagar and could be part of the reason why she is more troubled by the second incident than by the first.

The reason why Hagar is unable to help the chicks die may be

clearer once the scene where she accidentally wounds the sea gull in the cannery is examined. It is fortunate for Murray Lees that Hagar does hit the sea gull because the dogs that might chase him go after the wounded bird instead. But what is more important is Hagar's reaction to the gull:

Should I kill it? If I were miles away, and being told of this, or imagining it, I'd feel something for the broken gull, at least token regret, recalling its white curved soar into the wind. But now I only want to get it away from me, to shut its open beak so I needn't hear its cry. I'd gladly kill it, but I can't bring myself to go near enough. . . . It's not fair that I should have to sit here and listen to it. (pp. 217-18)

Her sympathy for the bird depends on aesthetics, on distance between her and the bloody creature. She would have more feeling for the dying sea gull if it were contained in the framework of a story. Perhaps the same could be said of the dying chicks or her dying brother or later of her dying husband. To encounter death in reality is a different matter from reading about it or being told about it.¹⁵ By focussing on her own feelings rather than on the feelings of the helpless creature, Hagar attempts to escape the reality of suffering and death.

In the scene in the dump, Hagar admits that she doesn't like to be shown up by Lottie since she "knows" that she has "more gumption" than Lottie. Of course, she knows no such thing. It is impossible for Hagar ever to do more than guess at Lottie's general level of gumption and the precise amount that killing the chicks required of Lottie. However, at the point in her life when Hagar is recalling this incident, she does see how important motive is. She knew (and still knows) that killing the chicks was the only thing to do in those particular circumstances and says so, but now she realizes that it is important that the person who did it has the right motive. When she was a child, she believed that Lottie killed the chicks out of pity. It seemed that Lottie's concern to preserve her lovely black patent-leather shoes was less than her concern for the suffering of the chicks. If this were the case, Lottie is an admirable person, and

¹⁵Hagar is equally drawn to an aesthetic view of love. To her, Bram is like a figure out of a romantic story or a fairy tale (pp. 45-46). She admires the "swooning adoration" of a knight and lady in a Holman Hunt print until she feels that "the coyness of the pair, playing at passion" betrays her by being so far removed from her own experience of love (pp. 82-83). At that point she throws the picture in the slough.

Hagar is guilty of a sin of omission. But the whole moral predicament becomes much less easy to define when Hagar admits that she has revised her judgement of Lottie's motive. Now Hagar believes only in part that pity was what motivated Lottie. The chicks "were an affront to the eyes, as well." Hence, Lottie may have killed them for reasons having to do with aesthetics: what is unpleasant to the eyes must be destroyed. However, again, we cannot take Hagar's words at face value. She cannot know whether this was the reason for Lottie's act, but she can certainly be projecting onto Lottie what her own reason for killing the chicks might have been if she had had enough "gumption." If we recall her reaction to the wounded sea gull, which can be seen to be related to the doomed chicks, it is not farfetched to think that aesthetics would have constituted a major part of Hagar's motive. Thus, she is right to say, "I am not sorry now that I did not speed them."

Because Hagar has put the idea in the mind of the reader that Lottie's motive is not entirely pure — "I am less certain than I was that she did it entirely for their sake" — the structure of the novel leads one to recall a previous scene where Lottie confronts death. When the undertaker's son takes a group of children to view a dead baby in the cool vault of the funeral parlour, Lottie is the only one who touches it. Hagar remembers:

I didn't like the looks of that baby at all. Charlotte and I hung back, but Lottie actually opened up the glass-topped lid and stroked the white velvet and the white folds of satin and the small puckered white face. And then she looked at us and dared us to do the same, but no one would. (p. 12)

One might see Lottie as being truly brave here, but it is more likely that, full of bravado, Lottie is testing the gumption of the other children. Having such a low status in the community, perhaps this action — and then the killing of the chicks — is the only way she has of proving herself, of drawing attention to herself. If this is the case, then, indeed, Lottie didn't kill the chicks "entirely for their sake." And there is the possibility that if Hagar had done the deed, she, too, would have done it out of a sense of bravado — to prove to others that she had gumption, as well as to live up to the image that she had of herself as a girl with backbone. Again, if she realizes that such a motive is a wrong one, she is right to say, "I am not sorry now that I did not speed them." If she is not credited with this insight into the connection between good deeds ("the only thing to do") and good

motives, the reader is left admiring Lottie for her act of mercy and condemning Hagar for her sin of omission and her later self-justification for it; or, if one is against mercy-killing, Lottie is condemned for not letting the chicks die a slower but more “natural” death, and Hagar is praised for standing by and watching. But the moral vision that Margaret Laurence is presenting in *The Stone Angel* is not as simplistic as either of these positions makes it.

Although it is important to understand what Hagar is saying in this crucial paragraph, it is also important to consider the occasion of her statement, “I am not sorry now that I did not speed them.” As an old woman no longer useful or pleasing to the eye, she might be identifying herself with the mutilated chicks who were neither useful nor beautiful. She may be saying that, because she wants to live as long as possible and not be speeded on her way, she is not sorry at this point in her life that she did not hasten their deaths. At the cannery she thinks, “If I sit quietly, willing my heart to cross over, will it obey?” (p. 192). But then she answers, “I’d not willingly hasten the moment by as much as the span of a breath.” And yet when she is in great pain during her last days, she eagerly accepts the pills and injections and other help the nurses offer that speed her on her way from consciousness and suffering to death. From this behaviour, it seems that Hagar’s feeling about whether she is sorry that she didn’t kill the chicks might depend on her own age and wellbeing at a particular moment. Perhaps her verdict would have been different at different times in her life, and perhaps Laurence is pointing out that a person is constantly reevaluating past actions and motives in terms of increased experience and a changing perspective in the present.

III

We can also judge Hagar’s failure to comfort Dan and kill the chicks as a failure of love. She cannot bend enough to show concretely her concern for other creatures weaker than herself or those needing help. Except for the occasion when Hagar lets Bram know that she sympathizes with him when his horse gets lost in the blizzard (p. 87), Hagar never says the right and loving thing at the right time. No matter what good feeling she has, it’s never the right

time to express it, and so she misses the chance forever.¹⁶ She can show anger but not gentleness; she may pride herself on backbone, but she lacks heart. Yet to be able to show love is not a weakness, as Hagar imagines, but a strength that she doesn't have until near the end of her life. Just as she is unable to help Dan die, she is unable later to help Bram die. Only John cares enough for his father to help him even if that help consists mainly of administering home-brew. Only Marvin says "I'm sorry" to Bram. Hagar is unable to do either. About John's role in Bram's death she says:

I don't know, either, which of us had cared about Bram at all, or whether either of us had. I know I'd nagged at him in the past, but God knows I'd had my reasons. And yet he mattered to me. John had washed and fed him, helped him to die — to what extent, only John knew, and whether he'd done the right thing or not and in what spirit, only God knew. (p. 184)

Is John "arrogantly meddling" here, to use John Baxter's words, and intruding his will where he shouldn't? In spite of Hagar's questions regarding John's motives, the context of the action suggests that John comes back to Bram and helps him die because of his love for his father, and Hagar leaves Bram and stays away as long as she can because she lacks love and cares more about proper appearances. In this case, however, at least Hagar doesn't presume to "know" John's motives in the way she "knew" Lottie's. But in this scene where Bram dies, the importance of motive is shown once more. To Hagar the right thing must be done for the right reason, but all her motives and actions are always hampered by her obsession with appearances — "you have to avoid not only evil but the appearance of evil" (p. 238).

Just as Hagar cannot help anyone die, not until near the end of her life can she help anyone live. The same destructive pride and lack of love that led her to desert Dan and Bram cause Hagar to interfere in John's and Arlene's lives. She sees their relationship as a "joke of God" — "if people had told me forty years ago my son

¹⁶John's death provokes her to say, "I'd had so many things to say to him, so many things to put to rights. He hadn't waited to hear" (p. 243). It's now too late for her to tell him that she's sorry for what she's done and must wait to say those words to Murray Lees. One other example occurs when Marvin mentions his years as a soldier. Hagar thinks, "I wanted to ask him, then, where he had walked in those days, and what he had been forced to look upon. I wanted to tell him I'd sit quietly and listen. But I couldn't very well, not at that late date. He wouldn't have said, anyway" (pp. 181-82). There are many other examples.

would fall for No-Name Lottie Drieser's daughter, I'd have laughed in their faces" (p. 204). Believing that God is a joker, Hagar enlists Lottie's aid in haggling "with fate, pitting our wits against God's" (p. 212). Because she sees John's and Arlene's relationship as a game of playing house, she feels free to try to break it up, but her judgement is that of a "blind slug" (p. 214). The truth is that Arlene works hard cooking and cleaning, washing and ironing, and because of the security and closeness of their relationship, John has not felt a need to get drunk constantly. They lack a marriage license, which they plan to get once Hagar leaves; otherwise they consider themselves married. Hagar is probably conventional enough to believe that a marriage license is necessary to turn an affair into a marriage. But another reason why she would label their relationship as "playing house" rather than marriage is that they don't own the house in which John lives. The house and furniture are legally Hagar's, and John and Arlene have no immediate prospects of earning the money that would enable them to buy the things that Hagar assumes would turn a house into a "proper" home and an affair into a marriage. With Hagar gone, they would have no need to "pretend" or "play house."

In her pride and misguided sense of what motherhood is, Hagar claims to know John and know what is best for him, even though at thirty John should be making his own decisions. She can't see that she's had a bad influence on him and Arlene a good one, and she refuses to talk seriously to either of them. Although she has two sons, she has always played favourites, and if she didn't positively encourage, she certainly didn't discourage John from living a life characterized by escape into fantasy and later into drink. And her leaving Manawaka probably gave him the idea that problems can be left behind instead of confronted. If John reverts to childish behaviour in accepting the bet with Lazarus Tonnerre which leads to his and Arlene's death, Hagar must take her share of the blame. With her away, John would have behaved like an adult. There is no question that it is Hagar who is better away — on the West Coast a long way from John.

For economic reasons, perhaps John and Arlene would be wise to delay marriage — or at least delay having children, which they have discussed together and are willing to do. But Hagar, the poor mother that she is, has not discussed her worries with John and Arlene and simply adds another neglected opportunity onto all those that make up her "incommunicable years" (p. 296). One of her

reasons for opposing marriage between them is, again, partly aesthetic:

I saw them with a covey of young, like Jess's had been, clustered like fish spawn, children with running noses and drooping, handed-down pants four sizes too large. I couldn't face the thought. All else diminished in importance beside it, when I thought what I'd gone through to get John away from just that sort of thing. The smell of it came back to me, the bone-weariness, the gray eternal scum of soap on tin washbasins. (p. 212)

Her worries about the welfare of whatever grandchildren might result are laudable but might get more sympathy from the reader if they were expressed in terms of adequate food and educational opportunities rather than in terms of running noses and second-hand clothes. Although Hagar says that "the money's the main concern" (p. 211), moreover, her motives for preventing the marriage are clearly mixed. Perhaps the economic reason is one that can be agreed with, but mixed in with it is Hagar's snobbery and something that could be called jealousy. Her snobbery is evident when, after she mentions money to Lottie, she thinks, "And in truth, it was. As I spoke the words I almost forgot Lottie" — almost but not quite. It is very important to Hagar that Arlene is Lottie's daughter. Lottie's lack of a family tree with proper roots is definitely part of the reason why Hagar opposes the match between John and Arlene. When Hagar describes Arlene's ancestors' lack of social standing, John replies, "But it's not her grandfather I'm going around with, nor she with mine" (p. 204). Her jealousy — or a feeling that verges on jealousy — is evident when she overhears John and Arlene make love in the kitchen. At first she observes:

Nothing to bless themselves with, they had, not a penny in the bank, a gray shell of a house around them, and outside a grit-filled wind that blew nobody any good, and yet they'd closed themselves to it all and opened only to each other. It seemed incredible that such a spate of unapologetic life should flourish in this mean and crabbed world. (p. 208)

John and Arlene have the kind of sexual relationship that Hagar was never able to achieve because of her pride and her destructive idea of the importance of appearance. It's not that Hagar is denying life in the sense of fertility, which she's had her share of; it's that she

glimpses something here akin to an ability to rejoice even in adverse circumstances. She later admits the connection when she says, "Every good joy I might have held, in my man . . . all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances" (p. 292). John and Arlene experience "good joy" and are married in a way that Hagar and Bram never were and never could be, and it is possible that Hagar resents this. Hagar is carried away by the existence of such an open relationship between a man and a woman, but only for a moment. Then she condemns them in characteristic terms:

Then I came to my senses. My first thought was that Lottie would have forty fits if she found out. And as for myself — the house was mine, now that Bram was dead. What they lacked in shame they made up for in nerve, the pair of them, doing it here on my Toronto couch in broad daylight. It burned me up, even to think of it. (p. 208)

Hagar's is indeed a failure of the imagination. She can't bend enough to see outside herself, and her concerns are not with the happiness of her son but with what other people would say if they knew what was going on — with her being able "to hold up her head in town" (p. 199) — and with the fact that John and Arlene have the nerve to use her house and her couch. Since her possessions constitute her identity, their disregard for the "proper" use of her house and couch could be felt by Hagar to be disrespect for her. As a consequence of Hagar's false values, John and Arlene die foolishly and needlessly. John dies, in effect, because "a bloody marble angel" — that whole weight of "proper appearances" — falls on him and breaks his back (p. 179).¹⁷

While Hagar and Lottie are planning the departure of Arlene, which is the news that precipitates the disaster, Hagar casts up from "the junkyard of her memory" the incident where Lottie killed the chicks while she looked on:

"Remember those chicks that day at the dump ground, Lottie, when we were girls? I always marveled that you could

¹⁷Of course, although much of what happens is Hagar's fault, she is not totally to blame for the kind of person she is. Her father, for instance, is partly to blame for what Hagar is — "The plagues go on from generation to generation" (p. 284) — but to point this out is not to excuse her for her values and her actions, nor is it to deny that some of her worst characteristics are also her best. J. M. Kertzer ("The Stone Angel: Time and Responsibility," *Dalhousie Review*, 54 [Autumn 1974], 499-509) makes this point.

bring yourself to do what you did. I haven't thought of it in years, but I used to wonder — didn't it make you feel peculiar?"
 "Chicks?" Lottie said, amused. "I don't remember that at all."
 (p. 213)

The fact that Hagar remembers the incident and Lottie doesn't could suggest that Hagar is imaginative and sensitive and Lottie cold and callous. Hagar has been bothered by her inability to kill the chicks, and that's probably the reason why she remembers it. Lottie succeeded in doing what she set out to do and so need not remember it. That could show insensitivity and cruelty, but if she, like Hagar, had thought that killing the chicks was "the only thing to do" and had had the right motive for doing it, there is no reason why the act should trouble her later in life. Of course, it is also possible that Lottie is not telling the truth when she says, "I don't remember that at all." Although she and Hagar have joined forces in trying to prevent the marriage of John and Arlene and although they sit and chat in a friendly way, there is a good reason why Lottie might not want to tell Hagar the truth. Lottie knows Hagar well enough to realize that any information about her life before she was an accepted and respectable member of Manawaka society could be used by Hagar as a weapon to hurt her. Lottie has no reason to trust Hagar. For instance, at the beginning of their "business" together, Lottie begins by praising John and his loyalty to his father. Perhaps the meaning of her words could be affected by her tone of voice, but as they appear to the reader they contain no irony. Hagar, however, seems to choose to hear the words as a disparagement of John and Bram. In reply, Hagar praises Arlene but ends by saying, "Well, it seems strange, doesn't it? When we were girls, Lottie, we'd never have dreamed of this happening, would we?" (p. 210). These words touch Lottie "on the raw," but Hagar feels that Lottie deserves "to have her roots flung up at her." Then Hagar cannot resist commenting on the fact that Arlene doesn't look like either her mother or father. Remarks of this sort that are said to hurt Lottie make it impossible for her to trust Hagar with any information she doesn't already have. If Hagar chooses to interpret Lottie's words about John and Bram as negative, there is no reason for Lottie to believe that any information about her socially unacceptable past — part of which is killing the chicks in the dump — won't be used against her too. If she does remember the incident and refrains from telling Hagar about it, that could account for her "amusement."

Because of the limitations of the first-person narrative technique, Lottie's feelings and thoughts are hidden from Hagar and from the reader just as were her motives when she killed the chicks.

Because Hagar herself recalls the scene in the dump at the conclusion of the "business" with Lottie that ultimately ends with the deaths of John and Arlene, it is natural that a reader would make a connection between the two scenes. But to equate John and Arlene with the mutilated chicks, and to label Lottie's and Hagar's action as the "stamping out of life," as Anne Thompson does, or the "arrogant meddling in those aspects of human affairs beyond the provenance of one individual human will," as John Baxter does, is pressing the connection too far. Hagar's problem is not that she meddles but that she doesn't know when to meddle and when not to meddle, and that when she does meddle or refrains from meddling it is always for a wrong reason like an excessive concern with proper appearances. Besides the examples given (the death of Dan, the killing of the chicks, the death of Bram, and the wounding of the sea gull) there are many more. For instance, Hagar did not interfere with Marvin's decision to go to war at seventeen, but did interfere with John's relationship with his father by taking him to the West Coast with her. Hagar was wrong in both cases. By the end of her life Hagar, because of acts of this kind, has around her neck a very large albatross indeed.

Telling her story to Murray Lees helps lessen the weight of her guilt. Lees is Hagar's guide, but it is not so much the "proper attitude toward death" that he shows her; even though he is not a good example himself, he guides her towards the proper attitude toward life. Finally Hagar comes to see that there are no absolutes except love and concern for others, that the truth of a situation has many aspects, and that there is good meddling and bad. After Hagar learns that "how you see a thing — it depends which side of the fence you're on" (p. 224) and that "things never look the same from the outside as they do from the inside" (p. 249), she is more inclined to consider other people's feelings and not assume that she sees the whole truth of a situation. Sometimes meddling in another person's life is the only thing to do, although, of course, it must be done with the right motive. For instance, Lees reports Hagar's whereabouts to Marvin who comes to rescue the old woman. "It was for your own good," Lees explains, and waits for Hagar to understand and pardon his intrusion into her life. Hagar replies, "Can't stop . . . Born in us — meddle, meddle — couldn't stop to save our souls" (p. 252). But

then Hagar realizes that it was "a kind of mercy [she] encountered him" (p. 253), that Lees saved her life — and "impulsively, hardly knowing what I'm doing, I reach out and touch his wrist" (p. 253). Speaking these special words, "I didn't mean to speak crossly. I — I'm sorry about your boy," is a breakthrough for Hagar. The previous night, as she told Lees about John and her role in his death, she shed the tears that had been bottled up inside her since John died, and now she can offer gesture and words to help Lees live.

Later her two free acts help Sandra Wong and Marvin to live. Getting a bedpan for the young girl and telling Marvin that he is a better son than John are not the simple acts they seem to be at first. Disregarding proper appearances and her own comfort, Hagar gets "the shiny steel grail" for a girl in need, and then, even more important, she and Sandra share convulsions of laughter as they remember the look on the nurse's face (pp. 301-02). Disregarding her own need for reassurance and the idea that it is wrong to lie, Hagar tells Marvin what he wants and needs to hear from his mother in order to live (p. 304). Here at the end of her life Hagar learns that there are no absolutes except one: love. She learns that sometimes a lie spoken with "a kind of love" (p. 307) is better than the truth, that sometimes looking foolish shows more strength of character than does an obsessive concern with proper appearances, that the goodness or badness of interfering in someone else's life depends on the motive and the attendant feeling as well as on the consequences of the act.

Thus, it can be seen that Margaret Laurence's novel is much more subtle and has a more complex moral vision that some critics give it credit for. Such a moral vision cannot be summed up in slogans such as: it is wrong for parents to "connive against the life urge" of their children, or the "intrusive human will" must not be pitted against God's, or the "destruction of the fertility symbol" is what shows Hagar's true personality. Laurence's moral vision is so complex that she needs the whole of *The Stone Angel* to show it in action — both negative and positive action. It involves not only the act and its consequences but also a consideration of circumstance, individual perception, and motive.