

Jason Currie as the Father Figure in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*

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Margaret Laurence in her novel The Stone Angel, one of the five works set in the Canadian prairie town of Manawaka, presents the life of Hagar Shipley, a ninety year old woman, whose life seems to be completely governed by her own stubbornness, the cause of which being her own father's proud and strict attitude towards his children. Strictness and discipline are essential things in the nurturing of children. But if a father overdoes it he creates havoc in the lives of his own children. Such a strict father is portrayed in The Stone Angel.

Hagar Shipley is the narrator of the story who discloses her past in the chronological order. She is the daughter of Jason Currie, a store owner. Jason, a widower is a self made man. Apart from Hagar, he has two sons – Dan and Matt. He is quite strict with Hagar's studies. He is of the opinion that if one does well in studies, he or she can get anywhere in the world. Hagar is good at studies, and Jason is pleased by that. When Matt shows interest to join college, he does not encourage it because he thinks that it is not necessary for him to join the college as he has sufficient education, and that Matt can become prosperous even if he looks after the store. On the other hand, Jason makes Hagar learn many household jobs such as embroidery menu-planning for a five-course meal and so on. But when she reveals her interest in teaching, he turns down her wish. The disappointed Hagar stays back and keeps her father's accounts.

In her youth, Hagar is drawn towards Brampton Shipley, not a well-to-do man. He is fourteen years senior to her and is a widower. He also has two daughters who were not in terms with him. Hagar marries Brampton against the wishes of her father. Her father Jason Currie breaks the relationship with his daughter, because he could never think of Brampton being a suitable husband for his daughter. Brampton does not have the ability to prosper in life. He is crazy after horses, and to buy them he almost becomes a bankrupt. Hagar does not approve of this and naturally both the husband and wife quarrel often. They have two sons – Marvin and John. Marvin is Brampton's favourite and John, Hagar's. John is often ill-treated by his father.

When Marvin is seventeen, he joins the army and Hagar along with John goes to work in the coast. She is given the job of housekeeping in Mr. Oatley's house. John assists her. Hagar puts John in school. After some years John leaves the school as he is not interested in studies anymore. He wants to go for work. Hagar comes to know that he is secretly keeping in touch with Marvin and Brampton. He insists to find work somewhere in Shipley's place, and he does so. John writes to Hagar that his father has been sick and he would be meeting his end very soon. Therefore, Hagar arranges a temporary maid for Mr. Oatley while she reaches Brampton.

In the meantime Marvin has married Doris while he is away from home. John is attending to the needs of his father. Due to the over-liberty given to him by his mother, he becomes useless day by day. Brampton dies and Hagar and John are left to themselves. John is in love with Arlene,

the daughter of Hagar's friend Lottie. Knowing that Lottie's family is better than hers, Hagar warns John against keeping company with Arlene. John becomes a drunkard and he never obeys Hagar. Finally he meets with an accident and he dies. Though Hagar is quite fond of John more than Marvin, it is Marvin who proves to be useful and loving to Hagar.

As she grows older, Hagar becomes more stubborn knows no bounds. Marvin and Doris look after Hagar although she does not like Doris at all. She finds ault with Doris at her actions and deeds. Marvin tries to admit Hagar in the nursing home many times, but he fails. Hagar is finally admitted in the hospital, where Marvin and Doris visit her regularly. Hagar realizes at her death-bed that she has been overruled by pride and that has been the reason for all the mishaps in her life. To some extent she was the cause for her dear John's death. But when she realizes all these things, it is nearly too late.

Hagar presents her sapphire ring to her grand-daughter Christina, whom she loves very much. Later in the hospital Hagar realizes that Marvin has been good to her always and about Doris she could not openly admit her kindness towards her. Her mind is lightened and she could feel that she is free now. Her stubborn nature gives way to showers of affection to all those who are standing nearby her at the time of her death. Thus with a very light heart, the old Hagar Shipley passes away.

Jason Currie, the father character of the novel, The Stone Angel is portrayed as a strict and disciplined man. Apart from these his proud nature too is reflected in the novel. He is a hard working man who does not believe in wasting a word or time. His nature is well known to his daughter Hagar Shipley. She observes:

“When he came over from Scotland as a boy, he didn't have a bean. He worked in a store in Ontario and saved enough to set up here on his own. He came out West by sternwheeler, and packed his goods from Winnipeg to Manawaka by bull-train. He was a mean man, it's true, but he got ahead. A man gets on by working harder than the rest – that's what he used to say – and if he doesn't get anywhere, he hasn't a soul to blame but himself.”¹(TSA p. 123)

The passage reveals that Jason was undoubtedly a hard working person but he was overdoing it at the cost of his life and of his children.

Jason Currie was the first merchant of Manawaka. Although he does not farm, he owns four farms and has them rented. Though a widower with three children, he never thinks of remarrying. Probably he thinks that marriage would spoil his attitude towards life, for he would like to be a strict father to his children. He loves his daughter Hagar very much and never used to call her by name but when he is crossed with her, he used to call her “miss”. It is obvious that Jason could easily distance himself even with an object of affection if she does not obey him immediately.

During leisure, Jason use to make his daughter concentrate on weights and measures, so that in future it could help her in placement. Jason believes in practical studies and not in bookish knowledge. As Hagar is good and clever at studies, Jason is pleased with her. And whenever she

gets a star for her better performance in studies, her father would present her with candies or a handful of pastel lozenges bearing sugary messages such as , “Be mine, You Beauty, Love me, Be true” and so on. If the children are free of their school work, Jason would give them some mathematical problems to solve or give them valuable advices. As he has come up in life through hard work he prefers to make his children follow him as an example. He would say:

“You’ll never get anywhere in this world unless you work harder than others, I’m here to tell you that. Nobody’s going to hand you anything on a silver platter. It’s up to you, nobody else. You’ve got to have stick-to-five-ness if you want to get ahead. You’ve got to use a little elbow grease.”² (TSA p.13)

He shows affection to his children whenever they are obedient to him. But he shows his other side when they misbehave. Once when Hagar misbehaves, he uses a foot ruler and looks sternly at her dry eyes with such anger as though he would surely draw water from them. He strikes Hagar with the ruler and finally drops it down. However his love towards her gets better of himself and he feels for his unnatural anger. He puts his arms around her and holds her tightly because he feels that he has been too cruel towards her. He looks bewildered, as though he wants to explain but does not know the explanation himself. In brief Jason’s strictness converts him to be a brute and when he realizes his fault he does not know how to mend it. The children cannot understand the remorse after such an incident. They can only remember the cruel act of their father which converts them to be adamant persons.

Jason is a god-fearing man and has contributed much to the Presbyterian Church. In his contribution to the church, his pride is reflected. The reverend Dougall Mac Culloch thanks all those who shows generosity by contributing to the church. While he calls out the names, Jason turns to his daughter Hagar and whispers:

“I and Luke Mc Vitie must’ve given the most, as he called our names the first.”³ (TSA p.16)

Jason’s pride is also exhibited when he brings from Italy the statue of Hagar’s mother. This statue is the first, largest and costliest of all in the Manawaka cemetery. It can be fairly guessed that Jason being a very strict man would have been quite cruel to his wife but the pride in hum compels him to give a costly statue to her. In other words, his strict discipline and the unlimited pride stand in contradictory terms. Hagar has imbibed the latter quality from her father.

When the children are in their teens, Jason would let them have parties. He goes through the list of esteemed guests and strikes off those names which he thinks to be unfit. He would not allow his children to mix with those children whom he considers worthless. He keeps his boys away from the half-breeds. He does not believe in letting Matt, his son to college because he thinks that he could do better helping him in the store. Jason says:

“What would he learn that would help in the store? Anyway, he’s past twenty – it’s too late for him. Besides, I need him here. I never had the chance to go to college, yet I’ve got on all right. Matt can learn all he needs right here, if he’s minded to do so.”⁴ (TSA p.42)

Jason firmly believes that just as he has come up in life, his son too can come up without college education. He never admits his children's desire or wish. He feels what he thinks is correct and is the best for his children. But for his daughter Hagar he has a different view. He tells her-

"It's not the same for you – there's no woman here to teach you to dress and behave like a lady."⁵ (TSA p.42)

The words point to Jason's concern for his daughter being in a high rank and thus imbue pride in her.

Jason therefore makes up his mind to send his daughter to the East and learn some useful household jobs. He never thinks in terms of his daughter's wish or desire. She has to simply obey him. After two years when Hagar returns she has learnt embroidery and French. She has also learnt poetry and menu-planning for a five-course meal, and other such things like hair-dressing, and so on. The father, Jason Currie is proud at his daughter's achievements. He is extremely pleased with her as she has made good advantage of the two full years. His comment on his daughter is:

"You're a credit to me. Everyone will be saying that by tomorrow. You'll not work in the store. It wouldn't do. You can look after the accounts and the ordering – that can be done at home."⁶ (TSA p.43)

Hagar's accomplishment makes him think that it will not be dignified to make Hagar work in the store anymore. He would provide her with dignified job such as looking after his accounts, which according to him is right for her. But when Hagar reveals his desire "to teach", he scolds her saying,

"Do you think I sent you down East for two solid years just so you could take a one-room school?"⁷ (TSA p.43)

He takes his decision that no daughter of his is going to teach in a school. Therefore he makes Hagar to look after the accounts of his store. Hagar observes:

Father took such a pride in the store – you'd have thought it was the only one on earth. It was the first in Manakawa, so I guess he had due cause. He would lean across the counter, spreading his hands, and smile so wonderfully you'd feel he welcomed the world.⁸ (TSA p.9)

The crisis in Jason's family occurs when Hagar expresses her desire to marry Brampton Shipley, a man fourteen years senior to her and also a widower who has two daughters. At first when Hagar reveals her desire, he thinks that she is only joking with him, because no sensible girl would choose such a lazy man to be her partner. But when Hagar shows her seriousness, Jason's anger knows no bounds. He shouts at her saying that she should not marry Bram who is common as dirt. This is the first time when Jason addresses his daughter as 'Hagar'. Never in his life has he addressed her as 'Hagar'. He says:

"There's not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family's consent."⁹ (TSA p.49)

It is natural to every father to see his daughter marrying a decent man. No father would let his daughter in the hands of someone who is worthless. The same happens with Jason. He could not

digest the idea of Hagar, his only daughter going after an impractical man. It is interesting to observe why Hagar chooses Shipley who is a total contrast to her father. Probably Hagar would wreak vengeance on her father who had been strict to her and who had thwarted her desire to teach, by marrying an imbecile.

Jason's words are left unheeded and his daughter marries Brampton Shipley. She never understands the importance of her father's words. After the wedding, Jason cuts his relationship with his daughter. He prefers to be with Matt and also builds him a house. But for his daughter he does nothing. He never gives any property to her. Hagar reports:

He specified the money and the property, though. A certain sum went to pay for the care of the family plot, in perpetuity, so his soul need never peer down from the elegant halls of eternity and be offended by cowslips spawning on his grave. The rest of the money was left to the town.¹⁰ (TSA p.63)

Once again Hagar's words reveal her hatred towards her father whom she had never excused.

Hagar thinks that her father would surely reconcile with her after her first son Marvin was born. But Jason is so adamant that he never comes to see and he can never forgive her disobedience. It is as though he never accepted Marvin to be his grandson. He must have deliberately forgotten his daughter because such was the wound caused to him by Hagar. When Jason dies, his funeral is not attended by his daughter. The strict father however has given only bitterness to his daughter who in turn reflects it to her own family members.

In all cultures, fathers ought to give their children basic things such as good food, clothing, proper education and so on, so that they can enjoy a better future. In a family, the father can be equated with a pillar on whose guidance and support the members of it can rely on. But if a father himself becomes weak, the whole family is likely to shatter. In the words of Leonard Benson:

The contemporary parent helps his children with school work, for example, as children begin to leave home in the late teens, the parent makes financial contributions and helps out in other ways – especially in seeing them through college and helping them setup households of their own. (p.12)

A father should be strict with his children if necessary because too much of freedom tends to spoil the child. A modern father, however, has understood this and he does not want to impose undue restrictions on his child. To quote Benson:

The modern parent is much more likely than parents in the past to be insecure as disciplinarian because we are now so conscious of the fact that traditional authority often does not work. (p.12)

In a motherless home, the father's role is likely to extend beyond the limits of a father-parent that is he assumes the role of a housekeeper and also a mother substitute. So in this respect he has to play more than one role. A father in a motherless home may find less difficulty in rearing up boy, but he has to be more careful and thoughtful in bringing up a girl. As a male, the father may not be accustomed to the nature and behavior of a girl. Maureen Green views:

Traditionally father has been the one to emphasize sex differences in the family, to encourage his son to keep his cool and maintain 'a stiff upper lip', while permitting his daughter to have a good cry; to make his son work hard and look forward to years of achievement while letting his daughter feel that being good and sweet is enough. (p.57)

A child is a careful observant of the ways and manners of the parents. He or she is likely to become good or bad according to the deeds of the father. If the father is good in character, naturally the child observes it and the same is reflected by the child. But if the father has the worse of his character, the child picks it up and then troubles rise out of it. It is through the parent that the child gets lots of experience to interact with his physical and social environments. Jerry J. Bigner observes some significant changes that took place in the role of the father between the years 1950 and 1970:

The view appearing in 1950 was that not much could be expected from a father in participating in child-rearing. In 1954 fathers were being encouraged to take a more active role in interacting with their children. By 1970 the general consensus in articles emphasizes that a father was expected to participate as much as possible in sharing child-rearing responsibilities with the mother. It was thought that fathers' increased participation would result in better personality development of children. (p.19)

Parents play a significant role in the career of their children. To a large extent, they are responsible for the moulding of their offspring's character, manners, habits and so on. The children too very much depend upon their parents and then give up. But in India, the case is different. That is to say, the children even after standing on their own legs find it difficult to manage things by themselves. They think it wise to consult their parents mainly the father. Although the father and mother both contribute to the progress of the child, it is the father who plays a vital role in upbringing the child. In a family and in an individual's life the role of a father is quite significant since he has to share the major responsibility to shape both the family and the individual. Within the family, he has to discharge his responsibilities as a son to his parents, as husband, as a parent to his children and also maintain the decorum of the family as the head. In all these aspects he has to show a fatherly affection in a different degree, and in the case of his children especially his commitment is deeper since he has to shape them as responsible citizens and mentally healthy individuals.

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