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Water as a symbol of regenerative force: A study of Margaret Laurence's select novels

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Abstract---The present study entitled “*Water as a Symbol of Regenerative Force: A Study of Margaret Laurence's Select Novels*” is proposes to investigate the water symbolism and water-related words in the novels of Margaret Laurence. She has been used many symbols, images, metaphors in her writings. This research paper focuses only on water symbolism and water-related words. She employed words such as, river, water, sea coast, pools, beaches, ocean, rain, and seashore. The study concentrates only five novels of Laurence namely, *This Side Jordan*, *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, and *The Diviners*. The main purpose of the study is to prove that how Laurence uses water symbolism and water-related words in her fictional work, to emphasize the regeneration and survival in the aspects of human life. Further, it investigates how the water functions as a symbol of regenerative force in human life, is to be examined in the research paper with reference to the characters of Margaret Laurence novels.

Keywords---water, sea coast, pools, beaches, river, rain, ocean.

Introduction

Margaret Laurence was one of the great Canadian novelists of 20th century. She makes frequent reference to the element, water and also water-related words in her fictions. It conveys symbolic meanings. This research paper deals with the five novels of Laurence, in these novels fifty water-related words are used a total of over five hundred times. Frequently the symbolism involved in the use of many of these words is directed towards one of several specific functions. More than twenty possible symbolic functions of water itself and water-related words in the five novels have been chosen for analysis because of their obvious predominance.

Laurence's use of water symbolism and its functions have been incorporated successfully into the weaving of her fictions. However, the presents of water symbolism and all other symbolism in the novels stimulates the reader who either consciously, unconsciously interprets the symbols or gains a new depth of understanding and appreciation for the writings of Margaret Laurence. The main purpose of the study is to emphasize that Laurence use of symbolism with regard to survival and regenerative forces of man's life.

Review of Literature

This study supplies review of literature Margaret Laurence's major critic deals with various theme and issues. The author Thomas Clara had written a book is *Manawaka world of Margaret Laurence*. It brilliantly describes the lives of the people in Western Canada, both Manitoba Prairies and in Vancouver. J. E. Cirlot a critic, he penned a book is called *A Dictionary of Symbols* is speaks about symbolism and its important. Tom Chetwynt was a Professor, he wrote a book is *A Dictionary of Symbols* is talks about fascinating world of symbols in story, dreams, myth and our day today life. David Staines, he was editor and critic writes a book is *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections (Reappraisals: Canadian Writer)*. It consists of collection of essays, which explores Laurence works and her influence on Canadian writer. Herbert Anthony Musurillo is a author, wrote a book named *Symbols and Myth in Ancient Poetry*. It focuses the treatment of symbols and myth.

In this connection, this research has got a survey of critical literature supplies an examination of the views of critics and how they have made a scrutiny of Margaret Laurence's novels, and it has been done in order to establish that the present researcher deviates from other critics in the appraisal of the Margaret Laurence's fictions. A single attempt at a scrutiny of the major novels of Margaret Laurence has not been made, and this study fills in the gap, and it is on this ground, the present study assumes an originating of analysis.

Water as a Symbol

Water symbolism in Margaret Laurence's fictions is to emphasize the regenerative and survival force man's life. Regeneration in this context implies improvement in man's condition after he has been ill in spirit or body, or has lost hope. In Laurence's writing water appears to be the regenerative force that instills new life and spirit in man. The other force that of survival, describes the power within man, which enables him not only to remain alive after some incident or occurrence that could have taken his life, but also to cope with the ordinary problems of life without succumbing to them. Laurence emphasizes this concept of survival by using water symbolism and frequently by placing survival in juxtaposition with death. Laurence's character often experience regeneration or spiritual rebirth near bodies of water. Especially near the Pacific Ocean in British Columbia.

Survival is frequently is symbolized by the act of swimming, swimming is survival drowning is death. The life of Hagar, the major character in the novel *The Stone Angel*, dramatizes the effect of water as a regenerative force as to a lesser extent to

the lives of characters in the other novels. The dramatic events toward the end of Hagar's long life become more meaningful with the added dimension the water symbolism gives them. When Hagar runs away to the Canary, here immediate concern is that she has forgotten to bring any water with her. The realization that she has no water to drink disheartens Hagar and makes her feel physically tired. The water with relation to the character of Hagar does not only emphasize her to survive, but also symbolizes the actual life in her. Without water she feels drained of life.

Chetwynd says and reinforces that in his book *A Dictionary of Symbols* "without water there is no life: so water is not an image or simile, but a symbol of life. Hagar searches for water, because in spite of being so close to her death, she has an enormous will to live. She is looking for a well, a container of water which would enable her life to go on, but there is no well. In using *The Stone Angel* as the title of the novel, Laurence has connected Hagar Shipley with the actual tombstone made of "pure white marble," in the Manawaka cemetery. The tombstone is hard and unfeeling, with blank sightless eyes. Like the Stone Angel Hagar has lived her life surrounded by her granite-hard fortress like pride. At the end of her life she looks for a well in the fortress. According to the J. E. Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*, "the well is also a symbol of the soul" Hagar's search for a well, then, appears to be symbolically related to her need to prepare herself for the end of life, to get in touch with her innermost being, her soul. The symbol of the well and in particular the act of drawing water from a well is like fishing – symbolic of drawing out and upwards the numinous contents of the deeps.

Laurence is preparing the reader for what will happen in the Cannery, when Hagar finally does get in touch with her soul and begins to draw out of her unconscious the memories which have been hidden for so long. Hagar does not want to take any changes with her life. Seawater is poisonous, it could lead to death. She does not want to die. Like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Hagar will not drink from the ocean. She will continue her search for water, impelled by her determination to live. Hagar is given new life by some rain water which she discovers in a rusty bucket beside a shed. She perceives it as her "well in the wilderness". Laurence is referring to the Biblical Hagar and her similar situation in the desert when she and her son, Ishmael, were about to die of thirst, until the angel of God pointed out a well for them, full of refreshing water which revived them both.

Hagar in the novel *The Stone Angel* observes that the water which has saved her life. The symbolism of decay points to Hagar's approaching death. Although she drinks the rain water is momentarily refreshed by it, this water of life tastes of morality to Hagar. Inside the Canary Hagar once more feels her thirst and says "A glass of water is really all I want." By these repetitions of Hagar's need for water Laurence is emphasizing the tremendous necessity for human survival. For Hagar this fight for survival goes on even after she is rescued from the Cannery and brought to the hospital, and again Laurence chooses water symbolism to highlight the events of these last days in the life Hagar. When the nurse gives Hagar medication to make her feel more comfortable and suffer less pain, she gives it with "a good big swallow of water." Hagar resists and the medicine sticks in her throat until she washes it down with water. Water, symbolizing the very life of

Hagar, serves as an agent to make her feel better at her moment of pain. During the night, when the pain returns, Hagar once more calls the nurse to her bedside asking for something to ease the pain. This time she does not resist but swallows the pill with another help of the water from the glass. Again with the help of the water the pill goes down and the pain subsides.

The very last pictures Laurence gives of Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* is her last moment of life when she tries to wrest the glass of water from the nurse's hand to hold it in her own hands and to drink. At the very moment of death Hagar Shipley desires the water of life and expresses her tremendous will to survive. Water here is also symbolic of the last sacrament, administered at the moment of death in order that the soul may continue living even after the death of the boy. Elizabeth Goldsmith reinforces this idea in her book, *Ancient Pagan Symbols*, in which she states that "the use of water as a sacrament of regeneration, symbolizing spiritual re-birth goes back to earliest times." Laurence's water symbolism here is truly universal and communicable. Laurence uses water symbolism in her other novels as well to emphasize the concepts of survival and regeneration.

In the novel *The Diviners* Christie tells Morag a battle scene he and Morag's father had experienced. He remembers how he passed out and when he revived, Morag's father had given him water. Christie also tells her that he shook so hard from the shellshock that the water spilled, because he could not drink it. Christie calls it "a goddams waste." Laurence suggests through this symbolism how life too is wasted under such circumstances. When Morag is visiting Jules at his deathbed, she does not know how to help him. In her desperation she asks if he wants some water. Jules does not want just water, he asks for both of them. Rye and other form of alcohol in Laurence's novels symbolize the opposite of water, the opposite of life. Jules will die, he does not fight for survival the way Hagar does.

In the novel *The Fire-Dwellers* regeneration and survival are emphasized also through water symbolism. When Stacey locks herself in the both room, feeling that she is drowned by her problems, she cries for some time, then stops and washes her face with cold water. The cold water refreshes her, taking the tear stains from her face. It also revives her so that she can return to the kitchen and go on with her life. This as well as the other instances of water symbolism mentioned earlier in this investigation. It has the common function of underlining the regenerative survival aspects of man's life. Laurence has used these symbols to such an extent that water could be considered a general symbol for life as opposed to death in all her novels.

Sea coast as a Symbol

A number of symbolic settings such as pools and beaches were identified with different periods of man's life. The symbolic settings can be identified as serving to emphasize the regenerative and survival forces in man's life. Quite often Laurence's characters are revived by being close to a body of water. The sea coast becomes a dominant symbol of regeneration and survival especially in the novel *The Stone Angel*. Hagar finally makes her decision to leave Bram, she heads for the west coast, to Vancouver, to start a new life. It is there that a rebirth is made

possible near the Pacific Ocean. Hagar's son, Marvin, does not return to Manawaka after the war, but goes instead "out to the coast" to start his life also in the setting which symbolically emphasizes regeneration. Hagar's younger son, John, returns to Manawaka and after his father's death finds himself unemployed, the older brother, Marvin, insists that he too should return to the coast. Marvin is sure that he could find something for John to do there. Many other people have found their way to the west coast especially during the depression years, thinking that they would rather be broke in a mild climate where the fuel bills would surely be low and the fruit was said to be cheap in season. The west coast symbolizes hope and the possible beginning of a new life for them all.

In Laurence other novels also the sea coast is an important symbol of regeneration and survival. In the novel *A Jest of God*, when Rachel achieves independence and begins to think of her own life she too wants to move to the west coast. Her mother is reluctant to leave Manawaka, but Rachel finally coaxes her into submission, reminding her that Stacey, the older daughter is also on the west coast. To leave Manawaka behind and begin a new life in Vancouver is so important to Rachel that she uses all her skill to talk her mother into going, to live in that setting that seems to so promising to Rachel. Rachel sees her life as being reborn and her future happy and free from the shackles of her small down "spinster-teacher" image. She envisions how she will walk by herself on the shore of the sea and look at the free gulls flying. Obviously Rachel hopes by this move to achieve the freedom and opportunity she has sought.

Stacey, Rachel's older sister, the main character in *The Fire-Dwellers*, could not wait to get away from Manawaka when still a young girl, in order to go to the West coast, where all opportunities seemed to be waiting. Having lived in Vancouver for a number of years Stacey has, indeed found security and happiness in her marriage Mac. In middle-age she begins to have personal problems, doubts about the values of her role as the mother of four children and as Mac's wife and as a middle-age woman. She sees life slipping by and resents the change in her body, the stretch marks and middle-age bulges that seem to brand her older than she feels.

Stacey's greatest concern is her inability to communicate with Mac and his seeming unwillingness to communicate with her. With these difficulties, after an intense quarrel with Mac, Stacey takes the car and drives off, finding her way toward the shores of the ocean. She wants to sit down near the water and think about her problems. Being close to the ocean not only clarifies her thinking but leads to her meeting with Luke, the man who lives in the cottage by the shore and who becomes Stacey's guide to a new life. Luke is reminiscent of the Biblical Luke who through his profession as a doctor helped and healed people. The ocean shore specifically and the west coast in general symbolize the regeneration and survival of Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers*.

The sea coast is the setting for the civilization in *The Side Jordan*. In the novel people from the villages are moving to coast in order to find a new and better life for themselves. Like the people of Manawaka in Laurence's Canadian fiction, the African people who want better lives move to the coast. The coast offers the

opportunity for them to achieve a new life. Johnnie and Miranda in *The Side Jordan*, an English couple who live in Africa, search for a new life close to water. They have had a number of problems in their life recently. Johnnie's business problems and the problems related to Miranda's pregnancy and the birth of their baby. On this particular day they leave the problems behind to be together and to begin a new phase in their life. The closeness to the water and to nature in general is refreshing to Johnnie and Miranda. They observe the old fishing boats which lie on the beach like shells cast off by sea creatures. Johnnie and Miranda have had difficult initiation periods in the early phase of their life in Africa. Now they are through that phase and ready to put behind their former naiveté in order to go ahead with the fruitful new life which the evening boats full of catch symbolizes. The sea setting has refreshed Johnnie and Miranda. As mentioned earlier, the African coast in *This Side Jordan* receives its new inhabitants from the inland villages.

Similarly the coast of Scotland in *The Diviners* becomes the new home and the place of refuge for people from the interior. These people unlike the African are driven off their land. This occurs in Christie's story about Morag's ancestors. Laurence uses the sea shore as the place of regeneration and survival. The displaced people find the beginning of a new life on the rocks by the sea. It is an unpretentious beginning, indeed, with nothing to lay their heads on except the rocks of the shore, but they are surviving. Later they leave the rocks on their journey to Canada and all the way to Red River in Manitoba where the new life seeded on the rocky shore of Scotland grows and blossom. The setting near the sea emphasizes the aspect of man's survival even in the most difficult circumstances.

In the novel *A Jest of God*, a water-related setting, the Wachackwa valley symbolizes rebirth in the form of the recovery of his health, by Rachel's pupil James Doherty. When James is too ill to go to school but well enough to be up around his home, his mother takes him for walks to the valley. Mrs. Doherty thinks that being around the river does him better in that situation than returning school. With his tonsillitis in check James later return to school recovered and well.

As previously mentioned, Laurence's symbolic sea settings emphasize the regenerative and survival forces in man's life. It is at or near the coast that her characters hope to find a future for them and begin new life. Both Hagar and her son Marvin in *The Stone Angel* establish their lives on the Pacific coast a do Stacey and Rachel Cameron at different times in *The Fire-Dwellers* and *A Jest of God*. Morag of *The Diviners* also moves Toronto to Vancouver at the point in her life, when she begins to build a new independent life. Her daughter, Pique is born there, another life beginning in the setting near the Pacific Ocean. Many other Manawaka people move to the west coast in hopes of a new and better life for themselves and their families. They all begin new lives, but not all of them are successful. To further emphasize the concept of the survival Laurence has taken the water-related activity of swimming and often pitted it against its opposite, drowning, making them symbols for survival and destruction.

Swimming and Drowning as a Symbol

Laurence's water symbolism pertaining to swimming also generally expresses living yet, death is never far away from Laurence's swimmers either. To be able to swim across a body of a water or otherwise cross it, means survival and the ability to go on living, drowning is failure to survive. When Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* worries about her children's possibility of survival in the big city, she wonders whether "may be the best think would be to bring them up in the very veins of the city, toss them into it like into a lake and say swim or else." Stacey understands that it might be better for the children not to be so sheltered that they are ignorant of the way of the city. Laurence symbol of being able to swim emphasizes the survival aspect in man's life in general and in the big city in particular. Stacey's son Duncan, he knows how to swim, nearly drowns when he gets his foot caught between some stones. Duncan was the unexpected baby in the family, born too soon after his brother Ian. In all of Duncan's seven years Mac has not shown his affection, never picked his up or paid him special attention. For Duncan survival includes having his father's approval. Yet Duncan continually displeases and infuriates Mac who cannot stand the boy's show of emotion even when Duncan is slightly hurt. After his father scolds him, Duncan feels that he never anything right. Laurence uses the drowning accident to enhance Duncan's chance of survival in the family.

Duncan appears to conquer his fear of the sea and of drowning. The literal drowning and survival incident reflects a more subtle, symbolic drowning and survival in Duncan's life. Stacey herself is confronted with the idea of whether she is planning to swim or drown, when she makes her way to the shore of the ocean at a critical time in her marriage. Luke who finds her there huddle on a stray log asks her directly whether she is "contemplating a swim." After his question he adds a remark, "don't drown yourself, that's all I asks." Stacey does not drown herself, but follows Luke into the cottage and having been helped by Luke over some of the difficult parts of her problems, eventually goes back home to Mac. Ever since she was a young girl Stacey has been an excellent swimmer, swimmer, sure of her ability to cross any body of water. Laurence shows the reader through the swimming-drowning symbolism that regardless of how Stacey may feel; ultimately she is a fighter and a survivor. The swimming-drowning symbolism is also used in many other places to emphasize survival.

One last example of the symbolic drowning-swimming is given in the epigraph to *A Jest of God*. The Biblical story of Jonah is thrown into the sea to drown, but is swallowed by a whale instead. Jonah remains in the stomach of the whale for three days and three nights and eventually is deposited by this "Leviathan" on the seashore. After that experience Jonah is a changed man. He was as good as dead, drowned and swallowed up, so to speak, he finally comes out alive after all, surviving the tremendous struggle. He does not survive by his ability to swim, however, but is miraculously resurrected from the pit of the whale's stomach. Now he is willing to obey God and do what he at first refused to do. Jonah is granted a new beginning.

Laurence has chosen this particular epigraph to foreshadow Rachel's symbolic drowning in the circumstances of her present life. The deepest and darkest level

of drowning for Rachel occurs with her loss of Nick and at the same times her pregnancy. It is at this point that she attempts suicide, reaches the lowest point in her life, and little by little begins to surface again. Finally she, like Jonah comes “out alive after all” and plans a new beginning on the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The symbolic epigraph clearly emphasizes the struggle and the eventual survival of the novel’s main character Rachel Cameron. In addition to the swimming-drowning symbolism Laurence uses rain several times to symbolize ongoing struggle in people’s lives, giving emphasis to the survival aspect in spite of the struggle.

Rain as a symbol

Laurence uses rain to symbolize the concept of a struggle followed by victory, occurs in *The Diviners*. Morag has moved to Vancouver, to start a new life on the west coast, but finds the continual rain overwhelming. The rain symbolizes the personal struggle she is going through. She is pregnant and tries to find a decent place to live. She has very little to live on although eventually she hopes to start writing again for a living. Morag is a survivor by nature; she has been orphaned at an early age and has struggled all her young life to survive. In spite of the rain, that is her personal struggle, Morag has decided to survive this situation too. Morag is determined to find for herself and her child the new life she has set out to seek and the problems will not stop her. Laurence’s rain symbol emphasizes struggle, but hints at victory and survival to come.

In Laurence novel alcohol symbolizes the opposite of water, the opposite of life. It is often called “firewater”, to contrast it with water which cools and refreshes a person. Even wine is perceived as a harmful agent. In the novel *The Stone Angel*, drinks the wine offered to her by the unknown man she meets in the Canary, she finds that it tastes “sweetish”, “slightly chemical”, but “delicious after the rain water.” The result of her drinking is, however a sick feeling, as she brings it all up later. Wine in Laurence’s novels does not promote health and life, rather it induces feeling of illness and discomfort. It does not satisfy a person’s thirst but makes it worse.

In the novel *The Fire-Dwellers*, after drinking Stacey has a tremendous hangover and the same kind of thirst as Hagar in the Canary. Stacey makes her way to the washroom, thinking, “Help water. water. I’m dying of thirst. Bathroom... Am I going to through up?” she like Hagar, feels very ill and her thirst is worse than ever. Rachel in *A Jest of God* uses whiskey to help her swallow the barbiturates when she is attempting suicide. The “firewater” burns her throat, and gives her a temporary reaction of lightness. She is not able to take the sleeping pills, however, and her resolve to die weakens momentarily. The whiskey does not help her to solve her problem. It has been a part of her plan to take her own life. It could have destroyed her, had she not come to her senses in time.

The three examples above show alcohol in Laurence’s novels is generally a negative agent, leading to illness and self-destruction. It is shown as the opposite of water which is a positive health-aiding and life-giving agent, satisfying a person’s thirst rather than making it worse as alcohol invariably does. Firewater is not an agent for a person’s survival but for his destruction. Water symbolism in

Laurence's novels emphasizes regenerative and survival forces in man's life. Hagar in *The Stone Angel* stands out as the character, whose life most dramatizes the effect of water as a generative force. Hagar's struggle to survive and to be restoring by water typifies the last days of her life.

Such other character characters as Christie and Jules in *The Diviners* and Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* also use water to improve their life condition. Christie and Stacey are reviewed, but Jules who prefers alcohol to water will generate. Laurence has also used symbolic setting to emphasize the regenerative and survival forces in man's life. The Pacific coast appears to be such a setting in *The Stone Angel*, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *A Jest of God*, as well as in connection with Morag's life in *The Diviners*. The African coast in *This Side Jordan* emphasizes the dynamic and forceful new African civilization. The coast of Scotland in *The Diviners* offers refuge and survival for Morag's ancestors and the beginning of their new life, as they embark on their journey to Canada. In fact, the ship that comes for them is another directly water-related symbol for shelter and survival.

Proximity to water gives new life to many of Laurence's characters. They go near the water troubled in spirit and sometimes even ill in body and after a while return refreshed. The examples of Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* meditating by the Pacific Ocean, Johnnie and Miranda in *This Side Jordan* taking a holiday on the beach and Jamie in *A Jest of God*, getting physically better near the Wachakwa River bear this out. The concept of survival is further emphasized by the swimming-drowning symbolism in all the novels. Often a struggle to survive is necessary, but the swimmers do survive at the end, they do not drown. Rain like the swimming-drowning symbolism symbolizes ongoing struggle, but there is a strong emphasis on survival and generation with the rain symbolism also. Rain symbolism used in this way appears in *This Side Jordan* as well as *The Diviners*. Laurence's emphasis is generally on the positive ideas of survival and regeneration rather than destruction and death.

Conclusion

The conclusion sums up the detailed study of water symbolism and water-related words in Margaret Laurence novels. She has utilized water symbolism skillfully in her novels. All the symbols are analyzed in the research paper, no matter what functions they serve or how variously they are interpreted, have the common characteristics of being water related. The research paper tries proving that a detailed study of water symbolism in Laurence's writings clearly examined in this research. It shows that water as a symbol of regenerative force of man's life and survival in all the stages.

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