

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Blossoming from Barren Stone: Female Bodily Aesthetics in Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*

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Received: 12 March 2026 Accepted: 26 March 2026 Published: 02 April 2026

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Abstract

The novel *The Stone Carvers* tells the story of a brother and sister, Tilman and Klara, both stone carvers, before and after the First World War, and explores how they heal from the trauma of war. Throughout the novel, bodily imagery is used to frame the protagonist's growth, with her body undergoing profound transformations from passive discipline to the formation of subjectivity. This article analyzes the representation of the female body in the novel through a focused examination of the protagonist, Klara. The study centers on a textual analysis that is theoretically approached from the perspective of bodily ideology and analyzed through frameworks developed by Michel Foucault, Raewyn Connell, and others. It delves into how Klara resists a fate of repression, confinement, and marginalization through professional development and the artistic gaze. In doing so, she shapes a new form of female selfhood and creates a new language of desire.

Keywords: *The Stone Carvers*, Bodily Aesthetics, Memorial, Gaze, Space.

1. Introduction

Jane Urquhart is a contemporary Canadian woman writer internationally renowned for her novels and poetry. Born in 1949, she has published eight novels to date and been acclaimed as one of Canada's most promising writers, having won the French Best Foreign Book Award in 1992 for her first novel, *The Whirlpool* (1986), and becoming the first Canadian writer to receive this honor. *The Stone Carvers*, published in 2001, is her fifth novel and was nominated for the Governor General's Award in the same year. Beginning with the immigration of German settlers in the 19th century, the novel is set primarily around the period before and after the First World War. It recounts the experiences of a brother and sister, Tilman and Klara, both stone carvers, and explores how they confront and heal from the trauma of war.

The Stone Carvers is the first Canadian novel to depict the history of the First World War from the perspective of sculptors. It records Canada's history of glorious yet bloody struggles, enabling readers

to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between Canadian national identity, culture, and the First World War. The novel also invites reflection on the devastation war inflicts on ordinary people. Since its publication, it has received widespread acclaim from critics, readers, and writers alike, with Allan Hepburn arguing that Urquhart's faith in the magic of storytelling elevates the novel far beyond the realism characteristic of contemporary Canadian fiction (Ferri 2005, p. 10). Rigelhof likewise suggests that in *The Stone Carvers* (Urquhart 2005, p. 54), Urquhart demonstrates, through the experiences of the protagonist Klara Becker, the process by which women passively adjust to and reconstruct their bodily subjectivity. As in Urquhart's other works of fiction, *The Stone Carvers* intertwines the fate of ordinary people, particularly artists, with Canadian history, articulating her views on female identity, gender relations, and the Canadian nation. The First World War and the unique social conditions of early 20th-century Canada disrupted the daily lives of women like Klara, forcing them to confront their lived

Citation: Xingyu Lu. Blossoming from Barren Stone: Female Bodily Aesthetics in Jane Urquhart's the Stone Carvers. *Annals of Language and Literature* 2026; 10(1): 01-11.

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realities, recognize the position of their bodies within power relations, and actively seek ways to overturn these relations to reconstruct their bodily subjectivity. *The Stone Carvers* blurs gender boundaries; this is reflected at a physical level, as the gradual erosion of bodily differences obscures the boundaries and power relations between sexes, highlighting Urquhart's profound reflection on gender relations.

2. Constraint and Oppression

Before the First World War, the social status and daily lives of Canadian women were profoundly constrained by rigid gender-role divisions, limited legal rights, and Victorian moral ideology. Legally subordinate to men, women lacked basic civil rights and economic autonomy, being confined to the role of the "good wife and wise mother." Their career options were severely restricted, typically limited to low-paid and low-status occupations, and they were subject to stringent moral standards. Nevertheless, this period was also the eve of social transformation. In experiencing multiple forms of oppression, women gradually began to awaken, giving rise to early feminist movements. In *The Stone Carvers*, women's constraints are primarily manifested in their limited living spaces and restricted occupational choices.

Space functions as a medium through which individuals are disciplined. In his essay *The Subject and Power*, Foucault (1982, p. 390) points out that, generally, space constitutes the discursive boundaries and positional configurations of conceptual knowledge, from which knowledge generates its effects of power. According to Foucault (1982), the mechanisms through which power operates upon subjects manifest in how the way experiential space is eroded by an a priori spatial order constructed by the "reflective" subject:

When forms of power exercise themselves directly over everyday life, they categorize the individual. They mark him by his own individuality, attach him to his own identity, and impose a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault 1982, p. 391)

In line with these delineations, Chinese scholar Quan Wen (2020, p. 40) interprets individual subjectivity as "the spatial positioning of existing individuals by knowledge–power", arguing that such subjectivity manifests as the political oppression of the body within space.

In *The Stone Carvers*, the protagonist Klara's hometown, Shoneval, is a small village located on the north bank of the St. Lawrence River, comprising primarily descendants of European immigrants: Tilman and Klara are of German descent, while Klara's former lover, Eamon, is of Irish origin. Shoneval is presented in the novel as a spatial entity, a desolate and primitive place. In the 19th century, when Father Gstyr from Bavaria was sent to Canada, he found himself:

In a pinewood forest trudging over an uncompromisingly flat terrain with a cloud of the Devil's own insects, called blackflies by the English, buzzing over his head and the head of his horse. His territory—his parish—covered approximately two thousand square miles of practically unpopulated backwoods, an area filled with all manner of birds, beasts, and insects of prey. (Urquhart 2001, p. 12)

Because Father Gstyr's Shoneval parish was surrounded by a vast, untamed, and hostile wilderness, its residents primarily engaged in agricultural labor and rarely left the village to seek livelihoods elsewhere. The consequence was space itself becoming a form of constraint for everyone in the village, especially for women.

The Victorian moral ideology positioned women as "angels in the house." In their work, Yang and Tian (2013, p. 36) noted that "the spatial domains of male and female bodies were strictly segregated, meaning that the public sphere was dominated by men, while women were excluded from it." Within this framework, the ideal woman was imagined as a gentle, pure mother and wife; the family was regarded as women's natural domain, whereas the public sphere belonged to men; spaces such as the kitchen, nursery, and sewing room were defined as exclusive to female individuals; women were typically confined to the home. In particular, the space where Klara's mother, Helga, appears most frequently is the kitchen, from where she waits for her husband to return from hunting and observes life outside through the kitchen window.

After Tilman ran away from home and Helga died of a severe illness, the 15-year-old Klara gave up her schooling and assumed the burden of the household, traveling back and forth between the family home and the tailor's shop because she believed that, "she had to stay on the farm in order to care for her father and grandfather" (Branach-Kallas 2003, p. 67). Although she was curious about the outside world,

the constant demands of tailoring work and domestic labor left her with few opportunities to go out. The limited occasions on which she did leave home were almost always connected to her boyfriend, Eamon O'Sullivan: they played together on the frozen surface of the St. Lawrence River; went into the hills to look for pigeons to send messages to Tilman, who had been away for months; took walks together. In addition, Klara asked her grandfather Joseph what their ancestral home in the Bavarian mountains was like. Joseph denied her the possibility of seeing such landscapes for herself, but brought her stones from the mountains, guiding her to imagine the terrain through these rocks. In Canada at that time, it was considered "immoral" for women to enter certain public spaces alone, and women of the middle and upper classes were expected to be accompanied by men when going out. Accordingly, Klara's excursions beyond the home were, therefore, always mediated by her boyfriend Eamon O'Sullivan, while her grandfather's guidance shaped her understanding of the wider world. These delineations showcase how Klara was able to temporarily escape the constraints of her geographical confinement only through male assistance.

Shoneval is a village steeped in traditional customs and dominated by agricultural life, where people's attitudes toward women are markedly conservative. Most villagers hold low regard for women's physical strength, a view shared by Klara's mother, Helga, who insists that the service she provides is "tailoring" (i.e., designing and making clothes for men) rather than "dressmaking," which she associates with making clothes for women. From her perspective, "any fool ... capable of looking in a woman's magazine and stitching two hunks of cloth together," whereas tailoring "required talent, skill, and patience" (Urquhart 2001, p. 45). This attitude suggests that Helga, despite being a woman herself, devalues women and believes that women do not require attractive clothing: "A good suit is all a woman needs for a wedding. Anything else is mere frivolity" (Urquhart 2001, p. 73). In Shoneval, people generally believe that women do not need to dress up because they do not leave the home to participate in social life, and, when they do, it is usually within limited social circles (e.g., church charities, literary societies, or gardening clubs) whose activities revolve around domestic concerns. In effect, women are excluded from the public sphere.

Women's occupational choices in Shoneval similarly reflect the social disciplining of their bodies. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1976, p. 153) writes that,

'Sex' is defined in three ways: as something common to both men and women; as a quality belonging to men, from which women are deficient; and, at the same time, as something that constitutes the female body itself, organized entirely around reproductive function and continually agitated by the effects of that function.

Such notions prevent women from pursuing alternative professions, while social stereotypes regarding women's physical capabilities further restrict their occupational choices. Judged according to male standards, the female body has historically been classified as inferior and subordinate, rendering biologically legitimate the conclusion of women's inferiority to men. Freud's (2018, p. 61) theory of "penis envy" serves as a representative example: based on an entirely male norm, it positions the female body as deficient and castrated. This biological devaluation of the female body leads to a series of bodily oppressions, including "gender restrictions inherent in the gender binary, constraints imposed on women under medical power, and the absence of and indifference toward female sexuality" (Huang 2005, p. 103). What these descriptions demonstrate is that biological characteristics are intertwined with social behaviors: traits like strength, aggression, power, and rationality are associated with the male body and regarded as dominant, whereas traits such as weakness, passivity, dependence, and emotionality are associated with female characteristics, which in turn are mapped onto women's physical body and thereby obstruct their professional opportunities. Urquhart once recounted the hardships endured by her female ancestors in an interview:

My grandmother had to care for eight children, two hired men, and her husband, performing all kinds of farm labor throughout her life. Because my mother was the eldest daughter, she was taken out of school and brought home to help my grandmother care for the children on the farm. (Filipczak 2010, p. 15)

Such experiences were common in the early 20th century. Canadian women were expected to remain at home and care for large families, look after younger siblings, and, once married, raise their own children. Klara was born into a family of carvers. Her grandfather Joseph, who came from Bavaria in Germany, was a master woodcarver trained through rigorous apprenticeship. From an early age, Klara developed a deep fascination with carving, often

sitting beside her grandfather to watch him work with wood for entire afternoons. She repeatedly asked him to teach her the craft, but Joseph intended to pass his skills only to his grandson Tilman. After Tilman left home, Joseph reluctantly began to teach carving to Klara. Even so, he set aside a chisel for Tilman, believing that he would one day return, and Klara was forbidden to touch it. Despite Klara's keen artistic sensibility and exceptional manual skill, the constraints of her social environment prevented her from pursuing carving as a profession. Her artistic passion could only find expression through assisting her grandfather in restoring church sculptures or secretly carving small figures for the nuns.

Disciplined bodies often become appendages and supporters of power. Resistance within the system is gradually transformed into compliance, further consolidating mechanisms of power, until the disciplinary regulation of women's bodies imperceptibly permeates all aspects of social life and reshapes women's consciousness. The women of Shoneval, especially the nuns, are no exception to this dynamic. Still, Klara's carving skills, combined with the tailoring techniques she learned from her mother, enable her to achieve a certain degree of economic standing in Shoneval. She mends clothes for the nuns, carves religious sculptures for the church, and "makes good coats for everyone in the village" (Urquhart 2001, p. 30). However, the nuns do not appreciate Klara's work, as they believe that neither carving nor tailoring constitutes appropriate labor for women. They even pity Klara, assuming that her suffering and prolonged unmarried life have forced her into occupations that properly belong to men. The nuns accordingly embody what may be described as "disciplined bodies": by restricting women's occupational choices, they reinforce male authority. Influenced by Catholic doctrine, the nuns believe that women should prioritize family life, therefore rejecting Klara's professional pursuits and insisting that she should return to the household—the domain traditionally defined as women's exclusive sphere.

3. Awakening and Soul-Searching

Before the First World War, the status and lives of Canadian women were constrained by multiple forms of limitation. This period concomitantly marked the beginnings of early feminist movements and stood on the threshold of broader social transformation. Feminist activism during this era constituted a crucial phase in women's ongoing struggles for equal rights,

with its core demands centered on three key domains, namely legal status, political rights, and social reform.

Within this context, the personal consciousness of the novel's protagonist, Klara, begins to awaken: she starts to confront her own body and define her bodily subjectivity in accordance with her own will. As Eagleton (1990, p. 28) observes, "there is something in the body which can revolt against the power which inscribes it." Tyranny and resistance, crime and punishment, oppression and disobedience are mutually opposed binary concepts; when one reaches an extreme, the other is inevitably activated (Liu 2020, p. 184). Here, space becomes the point of departure for this process of awakening.

With Eamon's help, Klara is initially able to escape the constraints of the domestic space, consciously loosening the spatial restrictions imposed on her body. From an early age, she longed to flee the confines of the household and wander beyond it together with her brother Tilman; Tilman refused, believing that she was too young. Klara, nonetheless, does not surrender, eventually attempting to break such spatial control through her romantic relationship with Eamon. As Urquhart (2001) says, "Until the accident of her uneasy and inexplicable connection with this boy" (37), she had remained confined to the home, the tailor's shop, and the convent. Thus, it is through the process of falling in love with Eamon that Klara is granted her first opportunity to leave home since she had abandoned school to care for her family, allowing her to experience a brief period of freedom and happiness. However, with the outbreak of the war, Eamon leaves the village in pursuit of his ideals and joins the battlefield. Deeply wounded by this separation, Klara interprets his departure as a betrayal and retreats once again into her former monotonous and confined existence, losing the freedom to leave home once more. This means that Klara's initial attempts to break her spatial constraints end in failure, revealing that women were not regarded as independent subjects in this historical context. Instead, they could transcend spatial limitations exclusively through the assistance of men, such that as soon as male support disappeared, Klara became unable to act autonomously or extricate herself from confinement on her own.

Eamon's death utterly devastates Klara, plunging her into a prolonged state of grief so profound that it borders on emotional numbness and withdrawal. Subsequently, her father and grandfather die in succession. She then becomes an old maid and, like

the other unmarried women in Shoneval, confines herself to the domestic space.

If they weren't schoolteachers, they often lived, as Klara did, near rather than in the town, on a piece of inherited property once worked as a family farm, the fields of which were now rented out as pasture for the animals of neighbouring farmers. (Urquhart 2001, 221)

They were known to have roots deep in the town's pioneer past and therefore commanded the respect such things still engendered at this time in these communities, though, beyond that, being the end of their line in a society mostly tribal, they had no real social life. (Urquhart 2001, 221–222)

Klara and other women in similar circumstances are hence “buried” in their hometowns and family homes. Although these unmarried women bear none of the responsibilities of caring for families, particularly husbands and children, they are nonetheless taught never to leave the places with which they are familiar. Although Klara does not confine herself to the kitchen and runs both a pasture and a tailoring shop in addition to carving wood for the convent, making for an arrangement more unusual than that of many of her male neighbors, she still finds no opportunity to overcome her geographical barriers.

Tilman eventually returns, bearing a damaged leg and news that stone carvers are being recruited. Canada plans to build a grand war memorial at Vimy Ridge in France, and the sculptor responsible for its design, Walter Allward, is seeking highly skilled stone carvers. This news inspires Klara to conceive of crossing the ocean to work on the memorial, as she had long wished to commemorate Eamon through sculpture. She “burst into meetings of the village council, demanding a war memorial,” yet “the esteemed councilors” rejected her proposal. Klara, however, does not give up. Traveling to Vimy Ridge to carve the memorial is far more than employment for her; it is an opportunity to commemorate Eamon in her own way; to pour her love and mourning for him into a monument honoring all fallen soldiers.

When Tilman tells her that her plan is impossible because of her female identity, Klara disguises herself as a man. Wearing “men's trousers and shoes” (Urquhart 2001, 254–255), she tells Tilman: “I'm going to Vimy and you are too. You told me they'd never hire a woman, so I'm going as a man, as your brother.” Tilman eventually relents. Klara sells several

cows from the farm to raise the necessary funds, and a few days later, dressed in men's clothing, she boards alongside Tilman on an ocean liner bound for France. To avoid exposing her identity, Klara pretends that she has lost her voice and throws all her women's clothing into the water, completely abandoning her female body:

Moved by the sight of her familiar clothing opening like the petals of dark flowers in the river, she had wept a little at what suddenly seemed to her to be the death of her young womanhood, a discarded body... (Urquhart 2001, 292)

This passage powerfully illustrates the extreme difficulty women face in attempting to break through their spatial constraints: Klara must entirely relinquish her female body and assume a male identity in order to enter the external world. Only this enables her to exercise her talents and realize her desire to commemorate Eamon.

In the first half of the novel, Klara can choose her occupations only within the confines of her village. Importantly, however, she advances further than her female predecessors. After her mother's death, Klara establishes her own tailoring business and gains local recognition, as well as takes over the family farm and successfully raises calves. Her unmarried status enables her to possess relatively complete property rights and, to a certain extent, the freedom to choose her own occupation. Thus, Klara's independence and perseverance, together with her growing self-awareness, allow her to directly confront the hardships of love, family, and war. She successfully resists the domination and control exerted by social power over her body, achieves self-recognition, and brings about a transformation in traditional divisions of labor.

Although Klara produces several sculptures for the convent, the nuns continue to criticize her work, insisting that carving is unsuitable for women. This indicates that Klara is unable to secure the right to freely choose her profession prior to her journey to France. When she applies, disguised as a man, for a position at the Vimy Ridge memorial, her slender physique, perceived as lacking masculinity, leads the memorial's director, Walter Allward, to assign her only auxiliary tasks. Klara ultimately demonstrates her exceptional skill by carving Eamon's face. Even after her gender is revealed, she is neither punished nor expelled by the other workers. Had she not left her hometown and traveled to France, she would never have found an opportunity to display her abilities.

4. Resistance and Transgression

Oppression gives rise to awakening, and bodily awakening is inevitably followed by resistance and attempts to break through adversity. Indeed, the multiple forms of oppression imposed on Canadian women before the First World War contributed to the emergence of early feminist movements. Temperance organizations, suffrage leagues, and labor groups became engines of social change as many women challenged institutional constraints with intelligence and perseverance. The outbreak of the First World War marked a crucial turning point regarding these confrontational behaviors. As men were mobilized and sent to the front, labor shortages forced society to temporarily accept women's entry into factories and public service sectors, laying the groundwork for subsequent breakthroughs in women's rights in the postwar period.

In *The Stone Carvers*, Klara's resistance to oppression is represented in several ways; for example, her body is always clothed. In *The Language of Fashion*, Roland Barthes (2005, 38) argues that clothing is a critical object of study, one that "requires ... a history, an economy, an ethnology, a technology, and ... a type of linguistics." Clothing indeed plays a significant role in Klara's everyday life. A tailor by profession, Klara possesses a degree of autonomy in choosing what she wears and has the skills to make her own clothes. Individual choices of clothing are closely related to self-image (Zhao and Guo 2021, 88), and Klara's clothing accordingly undergoes marked transformations over the course of the novel. When she falls in love with Eamon, she wears light and delicate garments, such as gauze scarves and pink ribbons. While working as a tailor, she spends time with her lover dressed in attractive clothing. Throughout their relationship, Klara deliberately chooses brightly colored, lightweight fabrics, reflecting her emotional happiness. When Eamon first appears in Klara's tailor shop, he orders a red waistcoat for himself, which initially surprises Klara as she has never made clothing in such a vivid color; the people of Shoneval habitually wear gray or black. Eamon is the first customer to request a red waistcoat, entailing that their love begins with red, while the relationship ends in black. After Eamon leaves for the battlefield, Klara no longer wears her pink gauze scarves, placing all her brightly colored clothes into drawers.

After the deaths of her father and grandfather, Klara becomes an old maid in Shoneval. Like other unmarried women, she favors black cotton dresses

patterned with small motifs, wearing such clothing in order to appear "ageless, sexless, and ill-humoured" (Urquhart 2001, 221). These dark garments symbolize the extinguishing of her vitality and inner life. Klara's somber emotional state begins to ease only when she encounters a newspaper announcement recruiting stone carvers for the Vimy Ridge memorial. Longing to commemorate her deceased lover, she puts on a red waistcoat and discards her plain clothing, an act that symbolizes the revival of her spirit and desire. Before departing for France, she even throws her former women's garments into the sea, demonstrating her firm resolve in this regard.

Nevertheless, power is inscribed on the body through clothing (Ding 2017, 151). For a long time, the dominant moral ideology positioned women as household guardians, treating the family as women's natural domain. Women were expected to work in occupations deemed compatible with feminine temperament, and carving was considered an exclusively male profession in which women were prohibited from engaging. Although Klara has already mastered the craft, she is compelled to relinquish her female identity and disguise herself as a man if she wishes to be recruited as a stone carver. This requirement constitutes a social constraint imposed on women, one that is manifested, at least to some extent, through clothing. Women must conceal their gender identity, and if they aspire to experience professional achievements, they must assume a male identity and wear men's clothing.

At the same time, during the garment-making process, Klara begins to direct her gaze toward male bodies. Gaze theory can be traced back to the Renaissance hypothesis of perspective, but was fully developed and reinterpreted within 20th-century postmodern discourse. The concept of the gaze has since been widely applied across philosophy, anthropology, literature, and film studies, with its scope and implications continually expanding. As a theoretical construct, the gaze refers to discourses of "seeing" and "observing" at both the sensory and psychological levels. Indeed, the gaze directed at the body runs throughout Klara's personal development and professional life. Following her family's path, Klara becomes an accomplished tailor and woodcarver before reaching adulthood, both practices that are intimately connected to the human body. This embodied knowledge enables Klara, when working with the bodies of villagers, especially male bodies, to enact a form of "counter-gaze."

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995, p. 200-203) articulates the power of the gaze. He argues that the gaze symbolizes power and authority, deriving from the model of the "Panopticon," in which the observer (i.e., by occupying the center of a circular structure) is able to maintain constant surveillance over all prisoners. Foucault's Panopticon metaphor illustrates how society can more effectively discipline and control bodies by constraining them in enclosed spaces. Klara is a well-known tailor in Shoneval, and nearly everyone asks her to make formal clothing for them. Consequently, villagers come to Klara's tailor shop and ask her to measure their bodies. The tailor shop is a space under Klara's control; during the measuring process, she undoubtedly acquires the power of the counter-gaze, and through measuring and observing bodies, she completes the construction of her own subjectivity.

Klara's lover, Eamon, is also a continuous object of her gaze. In the attic above Klara's tailor shop, they first fall in love. During the process of measuring him for the red waistcoat, Klara and Eamon gaze at one another. Klara's act of gazing at Eamon is not only the catalyst for their relationship but also a site of struggle between Eamon's gaze and Klara's counter-gaze:

She pulled the tape across his shoulders, surprised at their width after the slenderness of his torso. 'Turn back,' she told him as she wrote again in the book. "Now the arm."

They were facing each other again. Klara ran the tape down Eamon's arm.

"Do you know," he asked, his voice breaking slightly, "do you know that your hands are like doves?" Klara cleared her throat. "The waist," she whispered, choosing to pretend she had not heard him and thanking God silently she had never made trousers.

"You," he said, "with your neck like a swan." This statement was delivered when Klara had both arms around his middle and her cheek near his beating heart. "You who'll have nothing to do with a man like me."

With shaking hands Klara recorded the measurement in her book. In her mind she ran out of the room, down the stairs, across the orchard, and into the cedar woods. "I'll have to measure your hips," she said uncertainly, keeping her gaze directed at the floor. "I'll have to do that for the fit to be right." (Urquhart 2001, 79)

During the measuring process, Klara directs Eamon to cooperate with her instructions, deliberately ignoring his descriptions of her body. By contrast, Eamon gazes at Klara, likening her body and its parts to specific animals, and does not respond to her request to measure his hips. "'I'll die of this,' he told her. 'These words about you running and running through my mind'" (Urquhart 2001, 79). "These words" clearly refer to the comparisons he makes, and what runs through his mind is produced through his gaze at Klara. Had Klara not been a tailor, she would have been forced to submit to Eamon's gaze without the opportunity to return it. Thus, Klara's professional independence and the enclosed space in which she gazes enable her to prevail in this contest of gazes with Eamon. A few days later, they engage in an intimate relationship in the sunlit room above Klara's tailor shop, where she possesses the power to gaze upon Eamon's body.

At the same time, Klara derives a sense of self-awareness from Eamon's gaze, moving from what Simone de Beauvoir (1956, 273) in *The Second Sex* describes as a child who "would not grasp himself as sexually differentiated" toward a woman with a conscious sense of gender. "When she dressed that morning she stared at her body for the first time in a self-conscious way, as if it were someone else's body altogether, the nipples hardening under her gaze" (Urquhart 2001, 84-85). In his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", Jacques Lacan (2006, p. 75-77) argued that a child whose bodily experience is still uncoordinated encounters through a mirror a reflection of a unified and satisfying self-image, which then initiates the process of ego formation. The image perceived in the mirror is an "alienated" one: the child misrecognizes itself in the mirror and discovers a sense of coherence that is not yet fully experienced within the body itself. This image of the "other" is often embodied by the mother or by objects within the surrounding space.

As a girl, however, Klara is overlooked and does not experience a carefree childhood. Her mother constantly complains about why Klara has not left home and why she continues to appear before her parents. As a result, Klara acquires self-awareness much later in life and finds herself capable of constructing her self-image only through Eamon's love and his praise of her appearance. Here, Urquhart also emphasizes the contrast between Klara and her brother Tilman. Tilman, one of the novel's central figures, discovers his own "magnetism," his "angelic face" and "almost ethereal thinness," "something he

had never thought about before" (Urquhart 2001, 60). Like Narcissus in Greek mythology, Tilman may have discovered his own beauty reflected in lakes or rivers during his wandering life. Still, he uses his appearance to "affect the adults" and scavenge for food from "the bins of garbage stored behind brick hotels filled with commercial travellers" (Urquhart 2001, 60). As a result, even after seeing himself, Tilman instinctively continues to perceive his own appearance in animalistic terms, whereas Klara's self-consciousness is awakened.

Despite their mutual love, Eamon ultimately leaves Klara to join the war and is never heard from again. Thereafter, Klara runs her farm and tailor shop alone, silently invoking Eamon's memory and repeatedly attempting to build a memorial for him, only to be rejected time and again. It is not until many years after the First World War, when Tilman returns home with news of the planned Vimy Ridge memorial in France, that a new possibility emerges. At Klara's insistence, the siblings travel to France and become stone carvers for the Vimy Ridge memorial. The memorial depicts a magnificent battle scene in a highly symbolic manner: nine allegorical figures representing peace, sacrifice, justice, and other ideals are carved into a massive stone structure, evoking the height of Vimy Ridge itself. In front of the monument stand two cloaked young women, one standing at an angle before the soldiers, the other seated sideways on the steps of the memorial, gazing downward in longing and sorrow, as if mourning a beloved far away on the battlefield. These figures resemble "a particular kind of woman one saw now and then in villages the size of Shoneval" (Urquhart 2001, 221), especially spinsters. The novel describes them as follows:

Immediately recognizable as spinsters in both dress and posture, they favoured dark cotton dresses with small prints and sensible black laced shoes. Although they were always slim and kept their spines rigidly straight as they walked down the street, they appeared ageless, sexless, and ill-humoured. (Urquhart 2001, p. 221)

Klara is one of these spinsters who has long forgotten their youthful appearance. Every morning she rises, puts on dull clothing and black shoes, tightly pulls her hair back, and walks to the shops to converse with the shopkeepers in a mere attempt to avoid going mad from complete isolation (Urquhart 2001, 222). As Heidegger (1971, 35) observes, "the nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself

to work." The sculpted figures of the young women beside the memorial reflect women who have lost their loved ones in war and have been disciplined into self-containment, characterized by covered bodies, monotonous clothing, and emotional withdrawal. Moreover, these female figures, at least to some extent, reflect male fantasies about unmarried women, entailing that the girls carved for the monument embody male stereotypes of women: they are products of the male gaze, through which women are correspondingly constrained.

As Foucault (1982, 391) points out, the primary objective of struggle is to attack a form of power that makes individuals into subjects. When one's existence depends upon others, one is unable to exercise one's own power. In the novel, the stone carving work at the Vimy Ridge memorial enables Klara to reclaim the counter-gaze; upon arriving in Montreal, she is hired as an assistant. The working conditions at Vimy Ridge are extremely harsh, posing severe physical and psychological challenges; yet, Klara perseveres with remarkable resilience and determination, demonstrating exceptional skill and an uncompromising attention to detail. This all ultimately leads her to earn the respect of her fellow workers.

Every morning, she rises an hour earlier than the others and slowly carves Eamon's face into the stone. This act constitutes her counter-gaze upon the male body. Through sculpture, she resists the male gaze imposed upon women; by carving the male body and dismantling stereotypes of the "old maid," she challenges what Foucault describes as "a form of power that subjugates and makes subject" (Foucault 1982, 391). Sexuality also plays a role in Klara's resistance. Foucault (1976, 155–156) argues that sexuality is bound up with individual identity: "It is through sex... that each individual has to pass in order to gain access to his own intelligibility, to the whole of his body, to his identity." In *The Stone Carvers*, the protagonist's desire runs throughout the novel. In what Deleuze identifies as Spinoza's most outstanding work on the body, *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, desire expresses the striving of the body at the level of existence (Spinoza 2018, 29). Here, desire, together with joy and sorrow, is one of the three primary affects produced by bodily transformation. Conversely, affects themselves are capable of transforming the body (Chen 2019, 49). Father Gstyr is a Catholic priest who immigrated from Germany to Canada. Urquhart uses the image of the "bell," which the priest longs to construct throughout his missionary life in Shoneval, to represent his spiritual desire. Nonetheless, he dies

at the very moment the bell is successfully completed. This moment signifies the fulfillment of his desire and simultaneously symbolizes the establishment of Catholic dominance in Shoneval.

Klara's life is deeply intertwined with her spiritual power. In the first Chapter of Part Three "The Monument", Urquhart provides a detailed depiction of the repressive lives of unmarried women, including Klara: "Immediately recognizable as spinsters in both dress and posture, they favoured dark cotton dresses with small prints and sensible black laced shoes" (Urquhart 2001, 221). Moreover, Urquhart (2001) describes that, "They were often, perhaps as a result, very pious, attending mass more than was strictly necessary if they were Catholics or acting as caretakers and cleaners of the Protestant church if they were not." Most villagers in Shoneval are unwilling to join the fighting in Europe, meaning that the suppression of desire among these unmarried women is a consequence of religion rather than a simple result of the absence of men. Foucault (1979, 137) argues that the function of monastic forms of "discipline" is to achieve withdrawal from the world and increase each individual's control over their own body. From her teenage years onwards, Klara comes into close contact with the nuns at the convent, and her desires are correspondingly restrained.

According to Foucault (1976, 155), sexuality is "the most speculative, ideal, and internal element of the deployment of sexuality organized by power; it governs bodies, their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures." Sexuality is not simply the natural source of desire, but is culturally constructed in order to produce mechanisms of sexual experience capable of controlling and regulating bodily conduct. Klara falls in love with Eamon at the age of 19, and it is he who temporarily frees her from the disciplinary supervision of the nuns. Notwithstanding, whenever they engage in sexual relations, they do so with extreme caution, fearing discovery. This is because sexual activity not oriented toward reproduction has no legitimate place in society and is not to be spoken of, but must be denied and kept silent. Klara wishes to marry Eamon and bear children, but Eamon is determined to go to war and refuses her request that he remain in Shoneval. For Klara, social norms and the outbreak of war thus become mechanisms through which her sexual experience is controlled and regulated.

Desire is always active, seeking expression through conscious action. Nevertheless, because it is an impulse prohibited by social morality and religious

law, its emergence provokes anxiety, shame, and guilt in consciousness, being thus resisted and suppressed. Freud (1999, p. 81) argues that unconscious motives push upward and outward, while consciousness exerts an opposing force, pressing downward and inward, leading to a process known as repression. The function of repression is to preserve and conceal from the consciousness various desires and impulses arising from lived experiences and memory. Importantly, these impulses do not disappear, but remain latent and active within the unconscious, existing under the influence of repression and leading to transformations in sexual discourse. From that point onward, individuals no longer use the body to attain pleasure, but affirm themselves through the intensification of bodily repression. These conversations showcase how the cloaked female figures on the Vimy Ridge memorial embody the stereotypical image of women within a patriarchal society during wartime.

Klara is one of these women, concealing her body, withdrawing from society, living an ascetic life, and visiting the convent every three days to see the nuns. This recalls Charlotte Brontë's Miss Marchmont in *Villette*, "a perpetual virgin devoted to the memory of her lost lover," a nun who, in fact, receives no true religious consolation (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 406). In literature, nuns are frequently portrayed as figures who repress female desire. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 419) argue that repressive gender ideologies constitute the cultural roots of individual anxiety: behind their inner conflict lies a solid yet invisible social pressure. The nun is both a reflection of "silent obedience" and "a form of confinement," as well as the only socially acceptable mode of existence available to unmarried women. In such a role, they serve others, practice self-denial, and purify their desire. In reality, Klara herself lives like a nun in both lifestyle and attire, leading what Urquhart (2001, 403) describes as a "buried life."

The construction of the Vimy Ridge memorial marks the beginning of Klara's escape from repression. She breaks through spatial constraints and leaves Shoneval for Montreal to work as a stone carver's assistant. She puts on Eamon's red waistcoat and discards her former plain clothing, the color red symbolizing Klara's awakening to bodily desire and the end of confinement. Carving itself becomes a process of confronting pain and seeking understanding and reconciliation. Through arduous labor and collaboration with others who likewise bear the scars of war, Klara gradually emerges from her personal grief and discovers new purposes and passion in life.

On the scaffolding, she meets Giorgio, a close friend of Tilman. At first, Giorgio does not know Klara's true gender and assumes she is a frail young man. Polite and energetic, Giorgio gradually draws Klara's attention. Eventually, in the underground labyrinth beneath the memorial, Giorgio learns Klara's true gender; they fall in love and enter into a physical relationship. At this point in time, Klara has already moved beyond the grief of Eamon's death and released her suppressed bodily desire. Yet, when she falls in love with Giorgio, she immediately begins to devalue herself and her body in her own mind, believing it to be aged and fearing that she would be subjected to scorn if Giorgio were to acknowledge her true gender publicly. Some scholars have argued that Klara's mindset is "not feminist," a view that also suggests that Urquhart herself is less radical than some other Canadian women writers, as mentioned in the introduction. "I wouldn't go that far," Urquhart stated in an interview; "I've also decided that we are equal to such an extent that I really don't want to ghettoize us in any way. So I don't think we need affirmative action..." (Filipczak 2010, 20–21).

Nevertheless, within the context of her historical moment, Klara has already achieved a great deal in terms of bodily subjectivity. She fulfills what Urquhart sees as her task: women can do almost everything that men can do (Filipczak 2010, 20). Klara represents the artistic talent and strength of women who have long been overlooked in traditional society. She ultimately comes to occupy an important position within the male-dominated project of constructing the Vimy Ridge memorial, demonstrating the possibility for women to break their constraints and realize self-worth. Moreover, Urquhart skillfully situates the personal development of an ordinary individual within the broader process of Canadian nation-building. Through Klara's participation in the construction of the Vimy Ridge memorial, her personal experience becomes closely intertwined with a pivotal historical event in the formation of Canadian national identity—the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Klara's journey of redemption serves as a metaphor for Canada's postwar search for meaning and for the construction of a national collective memory.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in *The Stone Carvers*, Jane Urquhart constructs a profound and distinctive portrait of female growth. Through Klara's extraordinary journey (i.e., from the suppression of her innate talent to the realization of self-redemption and self-worth

through the art of stone carving), Urquhart mightfully demonstrates that the core of women's development lies in the awakening of their inner strength and the liberation of their creative potential. This process of growth is inseparably bound to perseverance, independence, artistic creation, and resilience in the face of both personal and national trauma.

Urquhart subverts the traditional narrative that positions romantic love as the sole driving force behind women's maturation, allowing instead Klara's middle age to remain radiant with creativity and agency. Klara does not integrate into dominant social norms through marriage but asserts her presence by managing a farm, producing garments, and engaging in sculptural creation, inscribing her own indelible mark within the vast currents of history—namely, the First World War and the construction of a national memorial. This novel is therefore not only a vivid representation of women's lived experiences in a specific period of Canadian history, but also a significant expansion and expression of the possibilities of female growth. It proclaims that women's maturity and empowerment can be achieved only through an understanding of their own circumstances, a recognition of the position of their bodies within power relations, and an active search for ways to transform those relations. Only then can a rational path toward the construction of subjectivity emerge, one that, over time, attains true dignity and endurance, much like the stones and memories that women carve and preserve.

Funding

This work was supported by the Hunan Provincial Graduate Research Innovation Project under Grant CX20250705.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Author Contributions

Xingyu Lu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration, Funding Acquisition.

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