Alistair MacLeod
ISLAND
collected stories

‘Beautifully crafted stories: elegiac, honest, proud, and both eloquent and taciturn, like their subjects...a wonderfully talented writer’
Margaret Atwood

BY THE AUTHOR OF NO GREAT MISCHIEF
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Geography: Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (New Scotland), Canada – the Maritimes
Landform: Island
History/Ancestry: Highland Clearances (Scottish), 18th and 19th centuries
Cultural/Linguistic Heritage: Gaelic (a “beautiful prison”)
Time period: Stories recounted in 1960s and 1970s but about earlier times
“Memory plays an important part in MacLeod’s stories, which often begin, as in ‘The Boat’, with the characters reflecting on past events that have shaped their future and the people they’ve become.” –Bruce Erskine

“Memories, like scars that you have on your physical self, you look at them later and you say ‘Oh, yeah, I remember how this came about and I remember what led to this.” –MacLeod

“We all inhabit a kind of a microculture. We may be different than the Chinese or we may be different than the Iranians and so on in our language and in our food and in our sexual patterns. But in the big world, in the macroworld, we’re kind of all the same. We all care about our loved ones and we all think about death and we’re all worried about betrayal and honesty and loyalty, no matter where we live.” –MacLeod

“It’s kind of like reading the Bible or reading Oedipus Rex. One understands all that. You don’t have to live in Thebes or drive a chariot. One understands all the ins and outs of what it is to be human.” –MacLeod

“I write out of a specific place perhaps for the larger world, although I don’t sit down at my desk and say, ‘Here I go for the larger world.’ You just do the best you can and hope it will come out right.” –MacLeod
The Boat

The main points of a good short story are:

1. It is complete in itself – it is not merely a fragment of a novel. Unlike the novel, it does not have much scope to develop character.

2. It deals with a single situation and is usually pervaded by a single mood.

3. Strict economy of material – every incident and character must have a vital part to play and must be tightly knit into one central theme.

4. It is made up of plot, character and setting – economy demands that only one predominate.

   (a) If the story deals with action, then the plot must be emphasized and the characters be merely figures in it;
   (b) If the story deals with character, the characters must be vivid and the story concerned with their most striking experiences;
   (c) If the story deals with setting both the characters and action must have significance only for the setting.

   L. Stevenson wrote: "There are three ways of writing a story...you make a plot and fit the characters to it; or you may take a character and choose incidents to develop it; or lastly you make a certain atmosphere and get actions and persons to realise and express it."

   The plot must be simple (no sub-plot), the characters few and relatively uncomplicated, and the setting conveyed briefly.

5. Everything must contribute to total impression – even a title. Opening and conclusion are vital to the success of the story.

6. Effective use should be made of dialogue. While perhaps not essential, dialogue can contribute significantly to the success of the story. Its advantages are:

   (a) It allows the author to explain without intruding his own personality;
   (b) It gives detail which would be hard to work into the narrative and avoids any suggestion of sub-plot;
   (c) It emphasises character, social class, nationality; and
   (d) It gives vividness, a little like that of drama.

Resources

https://youtu.be/cLw8LPGEfEc
Consider the literary devices used by Alistair MacLeod in his short stories.

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http://literarydevices.net/
Consider the themes that Alistair Macleod explores in the short story “The Boat”

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Alistair MacLeod has been hailed internationally as a master of the short story. Now MacLeod’s collected stories, including two never before published, are gathered together for the first time in *Island*. These sixteen superbly crafted stories, most of them firmly based in Cape Breton even if its people stray elsewhere, depict men and women living out their lives against the haunting landscape that surrounds them. Focusing on the complexities and abiding mysteries at the heart of human relationships, MacLeod maps the close bonds and impassable chasms that lie between man and woman, parent and child, and invokes memory and myth to celebrate the continuity of the generations, even in the midst of unremitting change. Eloquent, humane, powerful, and told in a voice at once elegiac and life-affirming, the stories in this astonishing collection seize us from the outset and remain with us long after the final page.
STORY-BY-STORY ANALYSIS

The Boat (pp.1–25)

Summary: An older man reflects on his youth as the youngest in a Nova Scotian fishing family. He navigates tensions between his parents, the demands of family tradition, and the loss of his father at sea.

This first story introduces us to the Nova Scotian world inhabited by many of the characters in the collection. Here, the primary means of income and survival is fishing, but it could just as well be mining or agriculture, as in many later stories. The central character—like others in the collection—oscillates between the traditional physical labour of his predecessors and the possibilities available to him through literature and the slow incursion of the outside world upon this isolated Cape Breton community. His mother embodies the stubborn, fearful determination of those loyal to a life of their ancestors, and is unable to fathom her husband’s love of reading or, as they come of age, the children’s. His father, on the other hand, despite his arduous labour on the fishing boat to sustain his family, instils in his children (particularly the son) a passion for narrative that sees the son considering David Copperfield, The Tempest and other literary works and characters as ‘friends I had dearly come to love’ (p.17).

The story illustrates a tension between a challenging pragmatic world in which the seasons and surrounding wilderness are a constant danger to a man and to his family, and a world of new possibility opened up by literature. Books are a imaginative escape for the boy, while for his older sisters they are a gateway to a life beyond the struggles of a poor fishing subsistence. The protagonist observes, ‘each year another of my sisters would read the books and work in the restaurant’ (p.15)—a kind of coming-of-age ritual that directly precedes them leaving their home for husbands in other parts of North America.

At the heart of ‘The Boat’ is the boy’s relationship with his father. This is a complex relationship in which the ageing father needs his son’s
presence in the fishing boat, but wishes for him to follow their shared
fondness for education and what the mother calls ‘useless books’ (p.10,
p.18). The story leaves us with a visceral description of his father’s drowned
and destroyed body; concluding imagery suggesting that neither books
nor boats can protect against the ravages of time and that, no matter what
one’s passions, death must come to all.

Key point

The latter’s encounter with the tourists demonstrates that this once-isolated
community is becoming less insular and more accessible to the wider world.
They record him singing traditional ‘old sea chantsey’ (p.12) in a gesture of
anthropological tourism that is to recur significantly in later stories, especially
“The Tuning of Perfection”. Their recording and ‘collection’ of culture is not
dissimilar to the documenting Macleod does with his stories.

Key vocabulary

Scotland’s Highland Clearances: a forced and at times violent mass
relocation, between the 1780s and 1840s, of agricultural families from
ancestral ‘Highland’ homes in Scotland to other parts of the world
(especially America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand).

Q What evidence is there that the mother and father’s relationship is
strained and difficult?

Q At school the boy discusses ‘the water imagery of lennson’, while
watching the real water in the harbour down the hill (p.19). How
does the story link the world of literature with the ‘real’ world of a
fishing family?

“The Boat” 1968

1. The first story in the collection. Why? What ideas do we
understand our integral to our understanding of this collection?

“…There are times even now, when I awake at four o’clock in the
morning, with the terrible fear that I have overslept; when I imagine
that my father is waiting for me in the room below the darkened stairs
or that the shorebound men are tossing pebbles against my window
while blowing their hands and stomping their feet impatiently on the
frozen steadfast earth. There are times when I am half out of bed and
fumbling for socks and mumbling for words before I realise that I am
foolishly alone, that no one waits at the base of the stairs and no boat
resides restlessly in the waters by the pier.”
solation, grief. He evinces throughout an overriding compassion for his characters, for their way of life, for the animals with which they live and die, and for - I can't help but think - his readers, who profit from his steadiness, his eye for the compelling amid the ordinary, his spacious understanding and acceptance of the multitude of human emotions, motives, failures, and achievements. MacLeod's quiet, careful prose, his ethical sensibility, and his generous compassion account for only part of the effect of his stories, because they are also marked by a constant violence, a violence of passion, of dangerous occupations, of the brute desire of animals to mate, of the elements, and of history. Taken in its multiplicity and repetition, this becomes an almost quotidian violence, resolutely not sensational or exploitative, but rather a constant in lives that seldom submit to the control of individuals. A miner describes his work as "the beauty of motion at the edge of violence, which by its very nature can never long endure" but which constantly recurs. Death is a regular occurrence in these stories, as children, parents, and lovers succumb to a life tempered by harsh weather, arduous and dangerous labor, remoteness, and drunkenness. Neither sentimental nor ideological, MacLeod pays homage to the laboring body, damaged, sometimes badly mutilated, but resolute in its capacities and accomplishments. "What is the significance of ancestral islands, long left and never seen?" one of MacLeod's narrators wonders. This question lies behind these stories, behind these characters who live in a new world haunted by the family names, accents, place names, songs, anecdotes, and lingering Gaelic that evoke their ancestral Scotland. While MacLeod narrates a world strongly demarcated by these inherited characteristics, he wisely and compellingly speaks to readers far removed from Cape Breton with his memorable and strikingly humane stories.
2. What can we say about these two sentences that open the story?

Notice the following features...

- LONG SENTENCES
- ANAPHORA
- POETRY?
- PERSONAL NARRATIVE
- ADJECTIVES
- VERBS-TENSE AND POWER
- RHYTHME AND RHYTHM
- MOOD
- TONE
- CHRONOLOGY
- POINT OF VIEW

SYMBOLISM
IMAGERY
MOTIF

THE BOAT

THE LANDSCAPE-natural and man-made

THE PAST

THE PRESENT

INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR LANDSCAPES

THE PEOPLE WHO INHABIT THESE LANDSCAPES

The Boat

“How did you like the boat?” “Were you afraid in the boat?” “Did you cry in the boat?” They repeated “the boat” at the end of all their questions and I knew it must be important to everyone”.

“The floor of the boat was permeated with the same odour and in its constancy I was not aware of change.” Page 12
“I learned first about our house, which was one of about fifty that marched around the horseshoe of our harbour and the wharf that was at its heart.”

“The houses and their people, like those of the neighbouring towns and villages, were the result of Ireland’s discontent and Scotland’s Highland Clearances and America’s War of Independence. Impulsive, emotional Catholic Celts who could not bear to live with England and shrewd, determined Protestant Puritans who, in the years after 1776, could not bear to live without.”

Page 4

“My mother ran her house as her brothers ran their boats. Everything was clean and spotless and in order.” Page 14

The mother

The mother is protagonist in the story. She is tied firmly to her family through her role as housekeeper. Is she independent or dependent on predetermined gender roles and family tradition?

“She was tall and dark and powerfully energetic. In later years she reminded me of the women of Thomas Hardy, particularly Eustacia Vye, in a physical way. She fed and clothed a family of seven children, making all the meals and most of the clothes…..My mother was of the sea, as were all of her people, and her horizons were the very literal ones she scanned with her dark and fearless eyes.” Page 14-15

“Jenny Lynn had been my mother’s maiden name and the boat was called after her as another link in the chain of tradition...” Page 4

“My earliest recollections of my mother is of being alone with her in the mornings while my father was away in the boat. She seemed to be always repairing clothes that were “torn in the boat,” preparing food “to be eaten in the boat” or looking for “the boat” through our kitchen window which faced upon the sea.” Page 3
The Father

Fathers are an important aspect of the social, moral and emotional growth of sons.

“My earliest recollection of my father is a view from the floor of gigantic rubber boots and then of being suddenly elevated and having my face pressed against the stubble of his cheek, and of how he smelled of salt from his red-soled rubber boots to the shaggy whiteness of his hair.

When I was very small, he took me for my first ride in the boat. I rode the half-mile from our house to the wharf on his shoulders and I remember the sound of his rubber boots galumphing along the gravel beach, the tune of the indecent little song he used to sing, and the odour of the salt.” Page 2-3

“Between the kitchen clothes rack and barometer, a door opened into my father’s bedroom. It was a room of disorder and disarray. It was if the wind which so often clamoured about the house succeeded in entering this single room and after whipping it into turmoil stole quietly away to renew in knowing laughter from without.” Page 6

“His usually ruddy face was drawn and grey, reflecting the exhaustion of a man of sixty-five who had been working in those rubber boots for eleven hours on an August day, and for a fleeting moment I wondered what I would do if he killed my mother while I stood there in the porch...” Page 11

The sisters

“The daughters of the room and of the house were vey beautiful. They were tall and willowy like my mother and had her fine facial features set off by the reddish copper-coloured hair that had apparently once been my father’s before it turned to white. All of them were very clever in school and helped my mother a great deal about the house...” Page 9

“By about the ninth or tenth grade my sisters one by one discovered my father’s bedroom, and then the change would begin. Each would go into the room one morning when he was out. She would go with the ideal hope of imposing order or with the more practical objective of emptying the ashtray, and later she would be found spellbound by the volume in her hand.” Page 9

“ Shortly after my sisters began to read the books, they grew restless and lost interest in darning socks and baking bread, and all of them eventually went to work as summer waitresses in the Sea Food Restaurant.” Page 10
The narrator

“I first became conscious of the boat in the same way and at almost the same time that I became aware of the people it supported.” Page 2

“And then there came into my heart a very great love for my father and I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following your own dreams and inclination.” Page 21

“And I know then that that day will go by as have all the days of the past ten years, for the call and the voices and the shapes and the boat were not really there in the early morning’s darkness and I have all kinds of comforting reality to prove it. They are only shadows and echoes, the animals a child’s hands make on the wall by lamplight…” Page 2

“And the spring wore on and the summer came and school ended in the third week of June and the lobster season on July first and I wished that the two things I loved so dearly did not exclude each other in a manner that was so blunt and too clear.” Page 19

“I say this now with a sense of wonder at my own stupidity in thinking I was somehow free and would go on doing well in school and playing and helping in the boat and passing into my early teens while streaks of grey began to appear in my mother’s dark hair and my father’s rubber boots dragged sometimes on the pebbles of the beach as he trudged home from the wharf.” Page 16

WRITING AND THINKING TASKS

• This story is fiction and yet seems so real. How does MacLeod create a feeling of authenticity in his stories?
• The use of first person narration enlivens the story but also is a more limited perspective. How does MacLeod use the first person narrator in this story?
• Who is the narrator? List five-ten things that you know about this character.
• This story uses the past reflections of its unnamed narrator to explore the issues of family, responsibility and love. What other key concerns/themes/big ideas are portrayed?
• The opening and closing of a short story are integral to our understanding of character and theme. Comment on the way MacLeod has utilised these frames.
• The turning point of a short story has traditionally been used as both a tool for building tension and achieving resolution. What is the turning point in this story?
• The setting of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia is integral in MacLeod’s stories. Find three descriptions of these settings. How do they invoke a sense of the landscape?
• List the characters in this story. List the characters in order of importance for the reader. Justify your decision. Match each character with a quote and symbol.
• List the characters in this story in order of importance for the author. Are there differences from the way you ordered the characters? Why or why not? What views and values are revealed in this exercise?
• The motif of the sea is a constant in this story. Find three different references to this image. How does MacLeod utilise the sea?
• What other motifs/images/symbols are used in this story?
• Comment on the title of the story. Why is ‘the boat’ so important?
• Who speaks in this story?
• What do we know about this narrator?
• Who is silent?
• What do we know about these silent characters?
• Why don’t the characters in this story have names?
• Are there any names that we know? How do we know this name and what might we infer from this?
• What role does music and song play in this story?
• What theme/s might this link to?
• What mood/s are explored and conveyed in this story?
• What questions do you still have at the end of the story?
• What are the key concerns of this story?
• Are there characters who embody these ideas or can be linked to these ideas?
• Are there characters who are linked to certain settings and landscapes?
• What KEY SCENES and EVENTS are important?
• Would you like to ask any characters a question? If so-to whom and what would you ask?
• Does the narrator develop or change in any way?
• How do the opening and closing scenes engage the reader?
• How do we feel at the end of the story?
The Vastness of the Dark

Summary:

This story is of a young man, the eldest son of a miner, on his 18th birthday. On this day he decides that he wants to leave his family, the small, insular town of Cape Breton and the predetermined pattern of life that has been established by his forefathers and begin a life and future of his own. To do so he must abandon his history and remake himself and a new set of value systems. Through the dialogue of a stranger though, he quickly learns that physically leaving a place does not enable the separation from the multitude of forces that have brought him to this place. Despite many actualisations and discoveries of self the clash between his past and present his journey continues into the unknown; the young man finally prepared to face the ‘darkness’ of an unknown future.

Characters:

James – the 18 year old young man experiencing the journey of self discovery

Grandfather – paternal grandparent who is quietly happy that James’ father has got James’ mother pregnant so that he too would be forced to continue to earn a living in the mines as he had and his father before him.

Grandmother – paternal grandmother who resents her husband for luring her son back to Cape Breton to take his place in the mines, with lies about the longevity of the Mining ‘seam’, the deaths and conditions of the miners and the weather.

Father: A miner, and father of James and 7 others, who has lost his job with the end of the mine he has been working on and who has lost all meaning and hope in his life, future, family and children.

Mother: The miner’s wife, and mother of James and 7 others, who continues to support and look after the family, despite her husband’s downfall.
**The Traveller:** Picks up James from the side of the road. Is not a local or a miner. He is an observer of the locals and the miners and uses this knowledge to use the often vulnerable and desperate Nova Scotians who are extremely destitute.

**Setting:**

Begins in Cape Breton, a small Nova Scotian mining town, where the lives of its inhabitants have been turned into turmoil by the close of the mine. The story follows the main characters journey into unknown territory with a strange who take him off Cape Breton island, across the straits of Canso, into New Glasko, Truro, Glenholme, Wentworth, Oxford and into Springhill; another mining town of which his own family have also worked the mines there.

**Themes:**

- Self Actualisation
- Recognition
- Sexuality
- Escapism
- Personal Advancement
- Idealisation
- Hostility
- Imaginative Landscapes
- Reality – shared and individual
- Memory
- Knowledge and Wisdom
- Time
Significant quotes and Analysis:

**Self-Actualisation:**

‘...I suppose we all like to think of ourselves as children of love rather than necessity. That we have come about because theirs was a feeling of peace and well-being...’

- James confronts the horror of hearing his parents conceive their children and the connection between them and their conception of human life.

‘...it seems that all storms subside first into gusts and then into calm and perhaps without storms and gusts we might never have calm.’

- James is often the unconscious victim of his father’s violence and brutality but sensitively recognises that without having experienced it he would never fully comprehend the beauty of peace.

**Personal advancement:**

‘For today I leave behind this grimy Cape Breton coal mining town whose prisoner I have been my whole life.’

- James decides to pioneer his own destiny and not to continue the road to self-destruction that his father, grandfather and forefathers have followed.

‘And I was aware once of the whistling wind of movement beside me..’

- James is taken into a mine with his father who violently kills a rat and this disturbs him greatly. He knows then he does not want to be part of this life.

**Reality – shared and Individual:**

‘The letters are written with the same broad-nibbed pen I an ink which is of a blackness that I have never seen and these letters now seem like a strangely old and incompatible married couple, each cancelling out the others desires, bound together by a single worn and dusty lace.’

- James becomes aware of the reality of age and the changing realities of love and relationships.

‘The reality of where I am and of what I think he is going to do seems now to press down upon me as if it were the pressure of the caving in roof which was so recently within my thoughts.’

‘I am overwhelmed by the awfulness of my over-simplification..’
'I had somehow thought that 'going away' was but a physical thing...And because my father had told me I was ‘free’ I had foolishly felt that it was really so...'

'I realise that the older people of my past are more complicated than perhaps I have ever thought...Their lives flowing into mine and mine out of theirs.

“Perhaps I have tried too hard to be someone else without realising at first what I presently am”.

-James confronts the reality of the locals of Springhill and how they incorrectly viewed him as a voyeur or observer of their lives. He discovers that he shares their reality, that he cannot escape it but must embrace and accept it, to grow and change.

Symbols, Motifs, Imagery:

- **Lost innocence** - Bedroom positioning, separated by the hall – Children on one side, James and parents (and sexuality) on the other, oldest son hearing the conception of his siblings,

- **Death and violence** – fathers missing fingers, death of miners, miners horrific working conditions, death of the rat, the lonely women crying out the names of their dead husbands during sex with outsiders, drunken rages of father, gnarled, broken fingers of the grandfather, the travellers commentary about Springhill being a great place to get laid given ‘lots of mine accidents happen here and the men are killed off’. The heavy descriptions of the deaths of the miners ‘hands and feet and reproductive organs and severed ropes of intestines festooning the twisted pipes and spikes like grotesque Christmas tree lopes and chunks of hair-clinging flesh’.

- **Personal destructions and loss of hope** – little reaction to James leaving from his mother and the look in his father’s eyes when he claims ‘something might turn up’. The comparison between the faces of the miners in Springhill and that of his grandfather and on the faces of ‘hundreds of people of my past’. The way the locals look at James as a stranger who they look at him as someone who will never understand their pain. ‘Like flotsam on yet another uninteresting river that flows through their personal banks...bound for a destination they have never been and cannot go’. The ‘glassed in’car. The constant referencing of ‘darkness’ and journeys into unknown, unlit and unguided places. ‘The car moves forward into the night...forever into the vastness of the dark.

- **Acceptance of the past to move to the future** – comparison of the mine and the town and when a man ‘puts blood into a woman’. In doing so Grandfather tells James underground mining life is part of their heritage and life source.

- **Freedom** – Grandfather grabbing James’ hand so he fears he cannot get away and the physical act of getting off the island. James likens the hold on him to ‘gigantic tentacles’ o ‘huge monstrous hands’ and his ‘desperate sense of urgency’ to escape sees him visualise every car as being ‘bound for a magical destination’ and the ‘shimmering highway with its mesmerising white line’
Subjectification – hornblasting teenage girl on the side of the road, the racist and derogatory remarks of the traveller about ‘Indians’ and the ‘niggers’ and the mother and her child who the traveller crudely claims ‘If I had my way they’d have something better’n that in their mouths’...and the revulsion of the women who ‘almost’ put off the traveller achieving sexual gratification by crying out her dead husband’s name during the act. The ‘multiscarred little town..reduced to but a few phrases and the act of sexual intercourse’.

Language and Linguistic devices:

- Metaphors
- Juxtaposition
- Narrative stance: First person narrative
- Semantic fields
- Paralinguistic features
- Colloquialism
- Allusion
- Anecdote
- Connotation
- Euphemism
- Sensory Details
- Comparing and Contrasting
- Empathy and Sympathy

Questions:

1. Find direct examples and quotations for each of the linguistic devices identified as being present in this story.

2. For each of the themes identified continue on a different plot line than that of the author.

3. Write paragraphs about the outcomes of all the characters, including James.

4. Discuss the connection/cycle of pride, loss of employment, trauma and poverty and self-actualisation.

5. Will James succeed or succumb to his past?

6. Write 3 short paragraphs using the same narration style as Macleod, utilising 5 language and linguistic techniques listed above.
The Golden Gift of Grey

Characters

Jesse: 18yo protagonist in the story. Academically gifted and wise beyond his years. He is embarrassed by his parent’s traditional values, their devotion to Christianity and their love of ‘hillbilly music’

Mary: Jesse’s sister, 16yo.

Donny: Jesse’s brother, 13yo.

Mother: A women who ‘bore her burdens silently’ pg 63.

Father: Works in a meat-packing plant. He is barely literate along with his wife. He is a man with the propensity for ‘awful violence’ pg 71. Both he and his wife are deeply religious.

Everett Caudell: Father’s childhood friend who encouraged the family to move to Indiana for employment at the meat-packing plant, and a better life.

Setting and Narrative Structure

The story is set in a northern Indiana city, but refers also to eastern Kentucky from where the family travelled for a better life away from the coal mines. Jesse’s father was nearly killed in a mine collapse. The setting of the story provides the family with a New World, but his parents struggle to reconcile their traditional values with the selfish materialism that exists in this new contemporary society.

It is significant to note that this is one of two stories in the collection to be set outside Nova Scotia.

The story is told in third person.
Summary/Analysis

The story begins with 18yo Jesse ensconced in a pool tournament in a local bar. Jesse looks at the ‘neon Coca-Cola clock and realized with a taunt emptiness that he had already stayed too late and perhaps was even now forever lost’ pg 59. He is 18 years old, a ‘minor’ who had been seduced to enter 2 years prior when he has ‘stopped outside the open door and gazed in at the life that moved beyond it’ pg 63.

The world of the bar held dichotomous opposites, paradoxes for Jesse:

‘not quite know if the feeling is one of ecstasy or pain, or if the awakening is victory or defeat, or if he is forever saved or yet forever doomed’ pg 60.

He remained seduced by the pool table, and the game that he was playing:

‘And he looked then at the soft, velvet green of the table itself, that held him, he thought, like a lotus land, and finally to the blackness of the eight-ball and the whiteness of the cue, good and evil he thought, paradoxically flowering here on the greenness of this plain’. Pg 60.

He is tormented by guilt at being out so late, fully aware of the anguish it is causing his god-fearing parents, yet he remained trapped:

‘Over everything and all of them the odour hung and covered and pressed like the roof of a gigantic invisible tent from which there could be no escape.’ Pg 62.
The story intertwines the bar, and the family home. The scene of the bar with its ‘three bloated no-longer young go-go girls’ with ‘heavy unimaginative movements’ starkly contrasting the family home where his heavy-set father would ‘walk from one window to the next, shielding his eyes against the glass while trying to catch a glimpse of his eldest son approaching beneath the street lights’ pg 63.

It is what Jesse reveals about his family that creates another paradox. His father, barely literate moved the family from Northern Kentucky where he was a coal miner, to the eastern town of Indiana for a better life. His father’s childhood friend, Everett Caudell had made the move previously and following a mine collapse where Jesse’s father was nearly killed, Everett had finally convinced him to follow.

His parents were simple folk:

‘Parents who he found difficult to understand, who still made treks to Kentucky and who were not above being openly emotional when their battered old car crossed the mighty bridge from Cincinnati to Covington, and who would not wash the red hill mud from that car on their return, waiting for the rains to do so as it stood out in the yard, and who listened to hillbilly music.’ Pg 74.

‘...they were sometimes angry and tried to be contemptuous of “book learnen” and people who were just “book smart” they encouraged both as much as they could, seeing in them a light that had never visited their darkness, but realizing that even as the fanned the flame they were losing grip on almost all they had of life.’ Pg 64.

‘And in the eyes of Miss Downs, the fourth-grade teacher, he had seen the unspoken question: “How can such a bright little boy as Jesse have parents such as these?” He remembered now that he had rather wondered how, himself.’

Such a paradox of lightness and dark holds the key to understanding this story. Light and dark could be seen as good and evil or black and white. Life is never black and white, there are always shades of grey. Whilst Jesse’s parents may only see things in black and white, the world of education and “book learnen” has opened up a new world of thinking to their children. The simplistic world from which his parents journeyed, a world where ‘jobs and life were at best uncertain amidst an awful certainty of poverty and pain’ pg 64 was incongruous with the new life that ‘found them ten years later waiting after midnight for the sound of footsteps at their door.’ Pg 65.

The world of his parents is still stuck in Northern Kentucky.

‘They did not know the aching loneliness of which it spoke when it floated from the windows of their house on warm summer nights it branded their parents indelibly as hillbillies and they themselves as well, as extensions of those parents. And it was a label that they hated and did not wish to bear.’ Pg 66.

He may have been ashamed of their ‘hillbilly music’ but Jesse was also filled with ‘a great love for the strange people who were his parents’ pg 74.
Themes

Tradition

Jesse is bound by the family’s moral and religious traditions. He knows his parents’ faith to be strong, and he struggles to reconcile his gambling and disobedience with their staunch values.

Transition and Change

Like many of the stories in the collection, the younger characters embark on change:

Jesse (and to a lesser extent his sister) is on the cusp of adulthood. He is committing a defiant act by staying out late at the bar, yet this is a world that is unfamiliar to him, and one where he knows he is not supposed to be.

When his mother insists that he returns the money, he does so begrudgingly. When Everett gives him permission to keep the money we see Jesse turn from confused, angry and naïve child, to one that is carefree and still innocent.

Transition and Change could also be applied to Jesse’s parents, although they fail to really successfully do so – they display a resistance to change. The fact that Everett and father were childhood friends shows the difference in the acceptance and adaption to the views and values of the society in which they live.

Education and Literature

Jesse’s world is completely removed from his parents due to education. He felt ‘a strange sensation and kinship with those boys in the F. Scott Fitzgerald stories’ pg 67, while his parents were ‘angry and tried to be contemptuous of “book learned” people’ pg 64.

Figurative Language

MacLeod uses similes, metaphors, alliteration and imagery a plenty in his writing.

‘And he looked then at the soft, velvet green of the table itself, that held him, he thought, like a lotus land, and finally to the blackness of the eight-ball and the whiteness of the cue, good and evil he thought, paradoxically flowering here on the greenness of this plain’. Pg 60.

Use the lines below to analyse the above:

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
and again:

‘...and then the sensation of the smoothly polished wood running slickly through this fingers as he shot and then watched the gently nudged eight-ball roll softly and silently across the field of green until it vanished quietly before his eyes, and he could hear it then, clanging and rolling noisily now somewhere beneath and within the table on its clattering way to join its predecessors in an underworld of dark.’ Pg 61.

Questions

• Why do you think Jesse decides to give the money to his parents?
• What lesson do the mother hope to teach her son by insisting that the money is returned?
• What is the meaning of the title of this story?
• Why do you think that MacLeod included the memory his father’s violence on Pg. 71?
• What lesson does Everett Caudell teach Jesse?
The idea of human destiny is explored throughout the text: whether to stay where you have roots or to seek a life in another landscape. In many of MacLeod’s stories, conflict arises when young men reject the life of their community for the wider landscape beyond the island; this is true in ‘The Return’.

MacLeod depicts the proud strength of the people who rise to the challenges presented by the landscape and expectations of tradition; particularly those who remain tied emotionally to the feelings associated with home, that no other landscape can ever be as meaningful for them. Several of MacLeod’s stories explore the idea of abandoning the landscape. Family expectations are strong: young men inherit their father’s work and loyalty to the clan is paramount. However, some are drawn to the world outside their tiny communities, often by the desire for a richer intellectual life as a lawyer or doctor in a modern North American city. They are torn between love for their families and the fear that they will be bound to the narrow lives their parents have led. The price they pay is a constant sense of loss and displacement.

The fourth story of the anthology explores a young boy’s experience as he visits his paternal grandparents for the first time. This story is mostly told through the eyes of 10 year old Alex who journeys with his parents, Angus and Mary, from Montreal to a coal mining town in Cape Breton. As Alex travels with his parents he acknowledges the underlying tension between his father's desperate excitement of returning home and his mother's annoyance and ignorance of this remote island community.
As the tale unravels, it becomes evident that the father's past and connection to his family and culture runs deep, yet his wife resists everything about their culture as she tries to shield her son from the experience. Early in the story, Angus becomes teary at the first glimpse of Cape Breton, however, his wife does not share his attachment.

During his two week stay on the island, Alex experiences the importance of family and group belonging for the first time, as he feels an overwhelming sense of unity and connectedness to his father's parents and cousins. The importance of clan is highlighted when his grandmother explains “he is one of our own” and consequently Alex is embraced and even protected by his “comrade of cousins”. This experience causes Alex to reflect that perhaps he has been somewhat “lonely” in his short life and wishes he had brothers or even sisters of his own. The themes of class and upward mobility also feature, as the son relishes the freedom and informal "play" among his cousins, while his over-protective, city-based mother is horrified by the rawness and lack of sophistication of the tobacco-chewing locals.

During his stay, Alex cannot help but make comparisons to his mother’s father, Grandpa Gilbert; a man in Montreal “who wears white shirts and dark suits with a vest and gold watch-chain across the front.” Although young, Alex begins to make insightful observations about his father who is also stifled “in the prison of his suit”.

From the onset, Alex’s grandparents create an impression in his life. His grandmother’s initial embrace reveals her "powerful hands" as she sweeps Alex up into her arms. She is a strong, wise and stoic woman who has raised 8 sons and has lived through the heartache of loss. Tradition and connection to family is paramount to this woman, and like so many of MacLeod’s stories in this collection, the women remain locked to their land and culture; reluctant to embrace change.

The grandmother reveres work and despises the intellectual life her son desires. The beauty of tradition is juxtaposed with the inevitable march of change. MacLeod is ambivalent to the end. He never judges his people but shows that all their decisions have a cost. The grim endurance of the men and women who stay is placed beside the loss and displacement of those who leave.
The father is anxious to mediate between his family of origin and the family he made when he left the Cape. The ideal of a happy reconnection falls far short of his imaginings. As they settle in for the return to Montreal the metaphorical journey of uniting present and past is unresolved. The clash of cultures is exacerbated by the visit to introduce "home" and the narrator states with symbolic intent: "We have come from a great distance and have a long way now to go."

MacLeod utilises several literary devices to engage his audience. The constant reference to the violin music reinforces a sense of Gaelic tradition and love of a culture that is difficult to maintain for the oldest son. It becomes apparent that Angus can only listen to the violin records when his wife is absent.

The title ‘The Return’ foreshadows Alex’s family visit to Cape Breton, but on reflection it serves as a poignant reminder that for Alex, there will be no more ‘returning’ to his ancestral home.

The role of being son and the implications that follow remains a constant thread throughout MacLeod’s stories. In this instance, Angus, who is the oldest son has disappointed his family by moving to Montreal and marrying outside the community he is from. He does not live up to the expectations of either family or culture, and the result is one of sadness, as well as the conflict this brings between him and his wife, and between him and his father. As the story continues it becomes apparent that Angus feels guilty because he has failed to support his alcoholic brother in Montreal. He has allied himself with his city wife’s disdain and abandoned the values of the clan. In this way, MacLeod highlights that those who leave their native landscape lose a great deal in the way of family support and tradition.

**Setting:**

- Journeying by train from Montreal towards Cape Breton. The channel of water between Cape Breton and the mainland of Nova Scotia is the Strait of Canso.
- Paternal grandparents’ house; mining and fishing town
- Cape Breton – a place of beauty; “the blueness that is the Strait of Canso with gulls hanging above the tiny fishing boats.”
- Grandparents are seventh generation of this land
Characters:

- Alex – 10 year old son; only child;
- Angus – 45 year old father; a lawyer who works for his father-in-law;
- Mary – 42 year old mother; beautiful; critical of husband and his family; dominant and overprotective
- Grandmother – strong; very tall; the mother of 8 boys; a woman steeped in traditional values
- Grandfather – 76 years old and still works in the mine with his sons; wise

Themes/Big Ideas:

- The feeling of being an outsider when returning to one’s original place of birth
- Contrast between modern and traditional life
- Loss – of identity, connections to family, sense of purpose
- Cultural ties - heritage
- Connection to place – through people (cousins) and place
- Love - parental
- Parental expectations
- Tradition and change
- Relationships -

Narrative Style:
First person perspective of young boy who narrates his insightful observations.

Language and Literary Devices:

- Tone
- Personification
- Contrasts – binary opposites
- Use of contrasts - between grandfathers,
- Detailed descriptions
- Similes and alliteration

Symbols and Motifs:

- The gulls – beauty/freedom – introduced at the beginning and conclusion of the story
- Clothing symbolic – Angus’s suit is described as a prison, Grandpa Gilbert’s suit, Alex’s tie
- Chewing tobacco – ritual of the miners – “because it is part of them…”
- Violin music – Gaelic heritage
- Home – the kitchen is often a central room in these stories
"You have been a long time coming home." (p.85)
Parental love; longing for son’s return
Sombre tone; disappointment

"He is very different to Grandpa Gilbert in Montreal who wears white shirts and dark suits with a vest and gold watch-chain front." (p.85)
Symbolic of a contemporary, city grandfather who is driven by work and wealth
The use of binary opposites is a common technique adopted by MacLeod, highlighting the contrasting personalities between his two grandfathers

"...a man always feels a certain way about his oldest son." (p.85)
Parental expectation

"I could never see myself being owned by my woman’s family." (p.85)
Expression of disappointment in son

Underlying tension between father and son

"...we both wanted to go to college so we could be something else." (p.86)
The desire to seek further education causes conflict between key characters; a fear of what might become...

"He works with different ones of the boys and tells me that sometimes he thinks they are carrying him just because he is their father." (p.86)

"A lawyer whom we never see and a doctor who committed suicide when he was twenty-seven. Lost to us the both of you." (p.87)

"But it seems that we can only stay forever if we stay right here." (p.87)
Fear and resistance to change
The importance of tradition and family values

"...we just can’t live in a clan system anymore. We have to see beyond ourselves and our own families." (p.88)

“We have to see beyond ourselves and our own families. We have to live in the twentieth century.” (p.88)

"...he is one of our own." (p.88)
Outsiders and belonging
"I have never before thought that perhaps I have been lonely all of my short life and I wish that I had brothers of my own - even sisters perhaps." (p.89)

"...as he stands so straight and lonely in the prison of his suit and inquires of our day." (p.91)

"...because it is part of them and their own way of life." (p.91)

"It is not that easy to change what is a part of you." (p.92)

"Good-bye Alex, you are the only grandchild I will never know..." (p.96)

Love; loss; regret

"We have come from a great distance and have a long way now to go." (p.97)

Analysing Quotes:
Select 5 quotes from above and provide a brief analysis of each one.

Chapter Questions:
1.) What is the significance of the title?

2.) Angus and his brother Alex decide to pursue an education and consequently move away from their family. Discuss the impact of this decision.

3.) It is not easy to leave your home and family. People can remain so tied emotionally and the relationships within families can stifle characters. Is this your view in 'The Return'? Justify your response.

4.) What insights does MacLeod reveal about tradition, transition and belonging?

5.) Select 2 significant scenes from the story and justify

6.) Discuss the relationship between Angus and Mary.

7.) MacLeod often utilises binary opposites to help consolidate his ideas. Find two examples of these contrasts.

8.) Often, the women in MacLeod’s stories are insightful and strong and this is also true of Alex's grandmother. Find evidence and quotes to support this statement.

9.) What is the significance of the violin music?

10.) What might Alex take away from his experiences in Cape Breton?
11.) ‘The Return’ spans across 3 generations as Alistair Macleod explores the relationship between father and son. What conflicts arise?

12.) Angus explains to his son, "It is not that easy to change what is a part of you." What is your understanding of this quote?

13.) Discuss the tone that MacLeod creates by the conclusion of the story. What is your understanding of this ending?

14.) What other links can be made between other stories in this collection?

**Mind Map:**

Select 3 other stories from ‘Island’ and make links/connections between ‘The Return’ and these stories. Consider themes, characters and underlying messages.

**Narrator’s Perspective:**

The story is told through the eyes of 10 year old Alex. What insights does he discover about his father? Provide a 150 – 200 word response.

**Literary Techniques:**

Select one of the following literary devices and justify how MacLeod’s use of this technique enhances the story:

- Similes
- Binary opposites
- Descriptive language
- Tone
- Symbolism

“Emily Brontë was too far north, Thomas Hardy was too far south. And so I came to the conclusion that great literature comes from anywhere, that it does not come from big cities, which everybody likes to believe, you know.”
The Lost Salt Gift of Blood

This story tells of the return of the 33-year-old narrator who has taken a “twenty-five-hundred-mile journey” from the North American Midwest to a small harbourside community in Newfoundland near the city of St John’s. The tale begins with beautiful descriptions of the landscape and a somewhat sexual portrayal of the harbour as a “peaceful womb” that admits the “entering and withdrawing sea”. This is perhaps an allusion to what happened when the “bright young graduate [student]” first visited this world “eleven years ago”.

After a physically (and emotionally) tense journey the narrator finally arrives at the “road’s end” and leaves his “rented Volkswagen” to observe some young boys fishing “barefootedly” for “salmon-pink sea trout”. It is immediately apparent that this is “no place to be unless barefooted or in rubber boots.” MacLeod builds the intrigue when the narrator states he does not feel comfortable here in his “smooth-soled shoes” and more tension when he comments that this is “perhaps for [him] no place at all.” The reader is left to wonder why he has undertaken this journey.

After considering his options and the fact that he “could easily drive away before anything might begin” the narrator approaches the “four small boys”. One of the boys, John, creates great excitement amongst the boys as he hooks and attempts to land a trout. The narrator is also tempted “to shout some enthusiastic advice” but admits he would not “know what to say”.

It is with the appearance of an old man and the question: “How have you been?” that it is made evident the narrator has a history here, and with the “glow of open hostility” it is apparent that his return is not a welcome event.

Over the course of an evening it is revealed that John is the grandson of the older couple and that his mother, Jennifer Farrell, one of their five daughters, had been killed in a car accident along with John’s step father, James. John had been living with his grandparents until “nigh on two year’s ago” when he returned to live with his mother and stepfather. The grandparents felt “nigh sick unto [their] hearts” and “missed him wonderful awful”. The arrangement did not work as “they could have no more peace with John than [they] could without him” so it was planned that he
would return to live with them once again. It is on the night of his return that his mother and step-father are killed.

At the conclusion of the evening, when the narrator goes up to bed he notes that “the room has changed very little” revealing a little more of his long ago connection to the house and the inhabitant of this room. Shortly after, when he “stand[s] and bend[s] his ear to hear the even sound of [his] one son sleeping” we understand the motive for visit and the reason for the uneasiness with which he has been received.

John’s grandparents were concerned that the narrator may wish to take him “away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout” and instead relocate him in the “land of the Tastee Freeze” (the airport is a symbol of the new world, a stark contrast to traditional sea-side existence.) The grandparents’ concern is allayed when the narrator “emphasiz[es] the ‘I’” as he informs them “I think I will go back today.” The grandparents’ relief and love for John is obvious when the woman tries to express her gratitude saying “I don’t know if you know what I mean but thank you.”

As the narrator prepares to return alone to the very different world he inhabits in the midwest he is presented with a symbolic gift of a “smooth round stone” from his son, that “glows with the lustre of near perfection.” A gift from the land, a perfect gift full of meaning; the sea, nature and time have washed and shaped this stone and have removed its imperfections.

There are several symbolic connections between this story and many others in the collection. As with many of the other characters the younger generation have moved away from the traditional home to modern, urban lives “far away in Montreal, Toronto or the States.” The men and women who remain maintain traditional roles. The humble home is depicted in detail, with worn out elements suggesting time passed and a perhaps links to a time long ago. There is also a link to the sea, the barometer, the windows looking onto the sea.
Key Themes: family, sacrifice, choice, fate, death, nostalgia, tradition, responsibility, love, song/music, identity, outsiders, the idea that a connection to the natural world/landscape is required for a happy life.

Significance of the title: The lost salt gift of blood – literal link to the superstition about the egg in the story; gift of blood-outsider gave the gift of life, gift of the stone. Many things are lost; ties of blood; salt sea governs lives; salt tears. This story ends with gifts; narrator gifts the grandparents his son (thank you). John doesn’t realise the gift (sacrifice) his ‘unknown’ father makes. He sits with a developer of traditional areas. His children meet him; a real family, however, the children ask for the father to give them a present. he has the extra knowledge of knowing that he has let his son go but his son has, in fact given him the gift; an understanding of values.

Quotes

“...standing at the final road’s end of my twenty-five-hundred-mile journey” –p120

“I could easily drive away before anything might begin” –p120

“no place to be unless barefooted or in rubber boots. Perhaps for me no place at all.” –p123

“Her eyes contain only mild surprise as she first regards me. Then with recognition they glow of open hostility” –p128

“missed him wonderful awful”. –p134

“It is difficult to achieve the actual act of saying.”

“We figured that maybe John should be with her and her husband.” –p134

“nigh sick unto our hearts we was” –p134

“I stand and bend my ear to hear the even sound of my one son sleeping” –p137

“And perhaps now I should go and say, oh son of my summa cum laude loins, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Tastee Freeze where you may sleep till ten of nine.” –p139
“I think I will go back today.” – p139

“I don’t know if you know what I mean but thank you.” – p141

“He opens his hand to reveal a smooth round stone...and it glows with the lustre of near perfection” – p140

**Literary references:** In this story, as in others, Alistair MacLeod makes several literary references. Place, landscape and belonging is as important to Alistair MacLeod as it was to 19th century English writers. The narrator refers to Emily Bronte’s novel, *Wuthering Heights*, which tells of the frustrated love of an intruder/outsider. The narrator comments that “Like a foolish Lockwood I approach the window although I hear no voice. There is no Catherine who cries to be let in”. The other literary references are the mention of a poem by Irish poet WB Yeats and the Irish mythical hero Cuchalain and the tragic Persian heroes Rostam and his son, Sohrab. This poem’s central theme is all about getting someone lost back and mourning for what might have been. In the story there is also the singing of folk songs of lost love through desertion and death. The grandparents and John sing and play the traditional tunes across the generations. The man feels uncomfortable/misplaced whilst they are singing.

**Questions:**

1. What deliberate language choices (literary devices) has McLeod made to create intrigue?
2. What ideas do we understand from this story that are integral to our understanding of the collection?
3. What impressions do we immediately glean about the narrator?
4. Although this story is a work of fiction, it seems so real. How does MacLeod create this sense of authenticity?
5. How does MacLeod use the first person narrator in this story?
6. What is the turning point of this story?
7. How does MacLeod invoke a sense of the landscape in this story? Support your answer with three quotations.
8. List the characters in order of importance for the reader. Justify your decisions.
9. Comment on the title of the story.
10. What role does music and song play in this story?
11. What key scenes and events are significant in this story?
12. How does the conclusion of the story engage the reader?
The Road to Rankin’s Point

Summary:
The narrator, a twenty-six year old man named Calum, goes to visit his grandmother who lives on a tiny farm at the end of a long winding road that ends at the sea cliffs of Rankin’s Point. The visit is ostensibly for the purpose of helping to convince his grandmother to abandon her home and move to the nursing home in the village, given that she is 96 years of age and her dispersed family is concerned for her wellbeing living on her own in an isolated and harsh environment. Throughout the course of the story it is revealed that the narrator is ill and has knowledge of his own impending death, which he has not shared with anybody. Thus, the real purpose of his visit is to learn/divine from his grandmother – a strong woman whom he admires for her vitality – how to live well in the face of death and prepare for his own ending. He compares himself to the diseased salmon returning to their original streams to die, highlighting the centrality of place to identity.

Characters:
- Grandmother – “What to do about Grandma” (tenacity, stubbornness, resilience) – “my grandmother has remained firm in her refusal to be moved from this her home” (p. 166) – consider in light of the Clearances; as representative of females?
- Narrator, Calum (consider heritage inherent in name – Gaelic, Scottish)
- The extended family (operating as clan)
- Animals (what purpose do they serve? What relationships do the various groups of humans have to them? How do they form an integral part of the land/place?)
- Natural environment – how does this act as a character?
- US vs THEM – who?

Setting:
- “quiet village” – community – consisting of people whose livelihoods are tied to land and sea (eg. fishermen) and also at mercy of nature doing their “quiet work”
- grandmother’s house at Rankin’s Point – solitude
- the “Little Turn of Sadness” – unmoving, still point of death, serving as portal linking time, events, generations and absolutes
- the road as intermediary between settings
- the contemporary world beyond (other ways of being, existing, connecting, making livelihoods and expressing culture)
- ancestral homes (in Scotland)

Beyond this immediate and concrete physical/geo-spatial setting, consider psychological/emotional, socioeconomic, cultural etc.
(Some) Themes/Big Ideas:

1. Living and dying
   - what it means to live well and how to prepare for death – inextricably linked – search for meaning, understanding, guidance, causality, explanations
   - inability to control/plan for life – full of accidents – irony of thinking we can ward off danger – “he lost his footing on the ice-covered rock, falling backwards and shattering the rum bottle he carried within his safe back pocket” (p. 148)
   - learning to live with fear that permeates life
   - death as universal, inevitable, unsparing truth – change in form, but continuity over time

2. Contrast between modern and traditional life
   - movement/progress vs. fixedness – are they actually binary opposites?
   - what is gained, what is lost/compromised?

3. Finding one’s place – the links that bind
   - the homing instinct (salmon) – pull of geography
   - relationships – grandmother names narrator for the first time (to reader) and literally identifies him: “Oh, you are here, Calum…I’ve been expecting you” (p. 156)
   - cultural roots – language (Gaelic), music (violin) and dancing – “she is very moved by the ancient music and there are tears within her eyes” (p. 158)
   - power of ancestry – MacCrimmons as “greatest musicians in the Scottish Highlands” (p. 159); “We are the children of our own despair, of Skye and Rum and Barra and Tiree” – grandfather’s writing on the rafters of the barn (p. 159)
   - knowledge and love – “the awful privacy of all our secret inadequacies”
   - place as core of identity: “And yet our sympathy seems never to lie with them, but instead with those who are besieged” – refusal to move even in face of power, tyranny, threats, emotional blackmail, force of numbers, the wheel of progress; allusions to the diaspora (Clearances)

4. Appearances and reality
   - seeming/appearing and being
   - art/artifice, pretence, putting on a face for others (photos)

5. Various forms of knowledge and ways of knowing
   - senses, intuition
   - seeing/loss of vision
   - superstition / spirit world – “neither my grandmother nor I can hear anything but we know that we are seeing the coming of sound to finer ears than ours. It is almost as if we can see the sound itself through an exchanging of the senses.” (p. 165)
6. Interconnectness of human, animal, environment
   • “she had been able to distinguish each dog’s cry and to comprehend the message that their anguished voices bore” (p. 149) – “sensing too that their lives had changed, and not knowing what to do” (p. 150)
   • power of nature to reclaims everything (dust to dust?) – “the road is now but a minor intrusion that the wildness will reclaim” (p. 147); erosion over time – sea pounding and smoothing the “rounded boulders”
   • the price of beauty – fulsome but short, will decay: “Everything has its price, they seem to say” (p. 146)

7. Communication / inability to communicate
   • comfort, familiarity, non-verbal communication: “We do not say what is on our minds nor make inquiries of each other” (p. 157)
   • difficulty of speaking, committing to words, inadequacy of expression – sudden and abrupt expression of private musings when desperation sets in: “We sit at opposite ends of the kitchen table and look across at each other, across what seems the vast difference of our separated years. We make some attempts at conversation but they are not very successful.” (p. 175)

Narrative Structure/Mode:
   • first person perspective of young male narrator/speaker – recollection after a key episode in life of narrator where he is seeking understanding
   • form of oral storytelling – reader primarily as listener, narrator primarily as speaker (ballad/forktale)
   • meandering nature of the tale – numerous unfoldings - disorientating sense of “now”
   • cyclical narrative frame pivoting upon “The Little Turn of Sadness”
   • narrator is 26, same age as grandmother when husband died – sets up reflective mode of narrative, and perpetuates cycles, repetitions and phases
   • narrative highly self-absorbed/consumed

Linguistic Structures & Features:
   • Irony – bleeding to death by the very thing that is supposed to keep him warm (rum)
   • Contrasts/tensions eg. between human world and nature (“the earth is alive, refreshed and new”), between old and new (music and dancing of grandmother and grandchildren, between here and away, between living and dying, between forms of death etc.
   • Personification of nature eg. “lapping and moaning of the sea”
   • Tone – very fatalistic/nihilistic – “like footsteps in the water, I think. No trace remains behind”
   • Repetition of “suddenly and unexpectedly” – refrain throughout (ballad form)
“It has been a bad year for lobsters because of the late ice and then the early storms which destroyed so much of the precious gear. During the last week of the lobster season many of the fishermen did not even visit their traps, preferring to remain drunk and discouraged on the beach or within the dampened privacy of their little shanties....In the cities of Ontario fresh cod sells for $1.65 a pound and the "dried cod" upon which most of us were raised and which we so heartily despised has become almost a delicacy which sells for $2.15 a pound. "Imagine that," says my grandmother, "who would have ever thought" (p. 143-4)

• economic realities that impact in a very real way upon livelihoods/lifestyle/decisions – difficult and demanding circumstances that do not afford the individual much choice
• foregrounds changes in supply/demand chain that come with modern life – interconnectedness of lives

“...together they will boom across the Canso Causeway and off Cape Breton Island and out into the world.” (p. 144)

• Cape Breton not part of world – right at the edge of civilisation – last outpost – isolated (“Island”) - boundaries

“As the water of the tributary joins the major river, its traffic and its travellers will blend and mingle within the rushing stream. They will become the camper trailers with their owner’s names emblazoned on their sides, and the lumbering high-domed motor homes and the overcrowded station wagons with the dogs forever panting through the rear windows. They will become the high-powered “luxury” products of Detroit, loaded with extras and zooming at eighty miles per hour from service station to service station, as if by speed alone they might somehow outtrace the galloping depreciation which even now threatens to overtake and engulf them. They will become the scuttling Volkswagens in the “slow” lanes on the long hills and the grinding trucks with their encased and T-shirted drivers carrying the continent’s goods and the weaving, swerving motorcyclists with their helmets reflecting the slanting sun..........Some few will end in twisted, spectacular wreckages, later moaning incoherently in the unknown hospitals or lying beneath quiet sheets of death while authorities search through glove compartments and check out licence numbers prior to notifying the next of kin. It is a big, fast, brutal road that leads into the world on this July day and there is no longer any St. Christopher to be the patron saint of travellers.” (p. 144-5)

• Lack of permanency – always on the move – sense of transience – not connected to place – strangers “looking at their maps”
• modern world out of touch with bare necessities of life
• careless march of technology and innovation – how much movement and progress is good?
• Interconnectedness of markets – passage and movement of goods across the continent
• Anonymity and unfamiliarity of the big outside world
• Religion/belief is dead
“Three years ago a lovers’ quarrel resulted in a car being stolen from the village below and then pushed over the towering cliff. For weeks the police and the insurance companies and various high-priced towing companies attempted to reach it but with no success. All of the cables and the extended booms and the huge tow trucks that were reared back on their hind and doubled wheels, and the men motioning with their gloved hands or hanging on ropes at the sea cliff’s wall did nothing to raise the twisted bits of metal that were scattered far below. Finally some men in a small fishing dory were able to get close enough to the cliff’s base to wade ashore in water up to their waists and retrieve what remained of the engine. Now if one hangs over the perilous edge the remaining bits of automobile can still be seen strewn along the wet cliff’s base. Here the twisted chassis and there the detached body and yards away the steering wheels and the trunk lid and a crumpled, twisted door. The cormorants and the gulls walk carefully amidst the twisted wreckage as if hoping that each day may bring them something that they had previously missed. They peck with curiosity at the gleaming silver knobs and the selector buttons of the once-expensive radio.” (p. 148)

- automobile – symbol of modernity, movement, man
- the power, permanence and persistence of nature – immovability, ability to absorb and re-integrate – as contrasted by weakness of men
- dangers posed in life – by love, by nature (cliff)

“A mile from my grandmother’s house her sheep being to appear, grazing or lying along the roadside and sometimes right in the middle of the road. They are the white-faced Cheviots that she has had for as long as I can remember and there is almost a timelessness about them. Open-faced and independent, they do not flock together as do the more conventional Oxfords and Suffolks. As the car approaches, the young lambs bound and scramble out of its way, bleating over their shoulders to the patient, watchful ewes. The thick-shouldered rams, with their heavy, swinging scrota almost dragging on the ground, move only at the last minute and then begrudgingly. Their flickering eyes seem to say they would as soon lower their heads and charge as relinquish this stony trail which they obviously consider to be theirs. / For decades my grandmother has been concerned about the purity and well-being of these sheep. She has worried about strange rams interbreeding and diluting her ‘stock’” (p. 151-2)

- animals mirroring characteristics of grandmother
- validity of animal existence
- age, virility, identity, community, independence, ownership
- concerns with lineage

“I have come to see my grandmother on this day almost as the double agent of the spy movies. I have come somehow hoping that I might find a way of understanding and of coming to terms with death; yet deep down I know that I will find only the intensity of life and that I am, after all, but twenty-six, and in the eyes of others, in the youngness of my years.” (p. 158)
Melodramatic, earnest and mournful tone – lack of humour
Irony – isn’t intense life what makes a good death?
Central preoccupation is with death

“’I would never have my children taken from me to be scattered about like the down of a dead thistle. I would not be that dead. It does not matter that some things are difficult. No one has ever said that life is to be easy. Only that it is to be lived.’ I have come today partially at least, hoping to find such strength for the living of my life and the meeting of my death.” (p. 172)

symbolic of ancestral displacement
degrees of death possible, even in life
stoicism and wisdom of grandmother (who/what does she represent here) – living with difficulty and compromise: essence of being human
search for meaning and strength in the face of unforgiving personal tragedy/fate

Symbols, Motifs & Imagery:

1. Roads
   - paths travelled – the symbolic, individual/communal journeys of life
   - movement/progress vs fixedness – end of the road etc., arterial, flow, connecting and dispersing, imagery of the tributary/river/stream
   - title: Road to Rankin’s Point – “tortuous”, “rocky cliffs that hang high” – arduous journey; solitary, dangerous, requiring courage; twists and turns of life; passage of cars dependent on nature, not man (“on wet days it is impossible for a car to make the climb”)

2. Nature
   - verbs used to describe nature ore overblown, lustful – the wantonness, decadence of bloom – overtaken by beauty - nature dominates, not reigned in
   - cliff – living on the edge (of what?) – contrast with “tiny farm” – SCALE
   - house has sunk into the earth – “the stone foundation of more than a century has worked itself deep into the soil and now all doors are forced to open inward” – embeddedness: into earth, nature, past, like the family
   - Nature as giving, generous, bountiful, plentiful (link with other stories) – “digging into the old square tea can which drifted ashore from one of the long ago wrecked vessels carrying the precious cargo from Ceylon”

3. Animals
   - “Almost all of my grandmother’s animals are descended from livestock that has been here for a long, long time and over the years they have taken on distinctive colourings and characteristics that are all their own” (p. 153) – significance of place, identities passed down (like Angus and Alex) over the generations (“Star or Tena”)
• “A single, white-tailed hawk glides silently back and forth, sometimes above the land and then beneath him across the summer grass but is not reflected within the deep, blue water. It is as if the mirror were perhaps too profound. He does not go far out to sea but circles and climbs and returns across the land; silent and graceful, holding his wings with rigid and controlled beauty, he bears with eloquence the message of his gifted life.” – very heavy-handed imagery, narrator sees symbolism everywhere; the shadow follows all of us; grace, beauty and freedom
• salmon – “…it is true that I have always liked it here amidst the loneliness and the privacy and the crying gulls. And I have thought of it many times during my ‘absent’ years….I have retuned now, I think, almost as the diseased and polluted salmon, to swim for a brief time I the clear waters of my earlier stream. The returning salmon knows of no “cure” for the termination of his life” (p. 165) – acceptance and homecoming

4. Blood (especially on snow)
• Life (bloodlines), but tainted with illness, death and disease
• recurring motif of stained snow: “Now as I feel my on blood, diseased and dying, I think of his, the brightest scarlet, staining the moon-white snow while the joyous rabbits leaped and pirouetted beneath the pale, clear moon” – callousness of life, always moving forward in the face of human calamity/tragedy

5. Women and hair
• grandmother combing hair - associations with freedom, femininity, the private act / ritual, sensuality

6. Entwined Scottish thistles
• representative of ancestral homeland
• “falseness of the brooch, for Scottish thistles do not twine. Perhaps at the time of its purchase I was being more symbolic that I had ever thought” – replica, imitation, pretence – not the real thing (like him?)
• we are all alone despite wanting to be together

7. Photography / camera / pictures
• still life / frozenness (consider link with snow)
• posing – wilful arrangement – not the messy chaos of real life – no movement – staging
• desire to impress – identity as show – deliberately choreographed – sailors and photographs of women – “artificiality” – “in the family groupings in which people are relentlessly encouraged to smile, one cannot always see the desperate hopes and fears that flutter behind the eyes, or fully reach the darkest truth”

Questions:
1. What tone does this story strike? How does this tie into the key ideas?
2. Why does MacLeod include such long descriptions of a) the road b) nature c) animals?
3. What insights is MacLeod seeking to share about life and death?
4. What are the different forms of knowledge possessed by various characters/groups in this story?
5. Why does MacLeod include so many references to religion/faith/belief?
6. What answers does this story provide to one of the central questions posed by Calum: “...what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen?”?
7. How is love made visible in this world (NB. Consider different kinds of love)?
8. Calum observes of his grandmother: “She swings lightly and easily within my arms. There is no one in the nursing home who has lived as long as she”. What does it mean, as suggested by MacLeod, to live well?
9. “My twenty-six years are not enough and I would want to go farther and farther back through previous generations so that I might have more of what now seems so little....I would go back to the priest with the magic hands. Back to the faith healer if only I had more faith. Back to anything rather than to die at the objective hands of mute, cold science”. What have been the gains and losses of modern life, and why would Calum choose to extend his life by reaching into the past rather than into the future?
10. From where, and at what point in time, is this story being told to the reader/listener? Why does MacLeod situate his narrator here? What is he seeking to highlight?
11. How does the title of the collection, “Island”, relate to/inform this story?
12. What stylistic features does this story share with the other stories in the collection? Discuss with reference to 3 other stories.
Summary:

This is the story of an experienced and highly skilled minor who works in a ‘crew’ of similarly expert and much sought after miners. These men work in a Canadian mining pack known as McKinnon, with only two other groups with similar excellence in what they do. These expert crews travel the world ‘liberating resources’ for the multi-million dollar development companies, who pay them ‘handsomely’ and endure ‘their Summer on the beach’, their ‘lack of response to urgent messages’ to return to work and their ‘Toronto drunkenness’. This story follows the inner dialogue of the leader of this mining group who, along with his ‘crew’, has chosen to delay their next ‘dig’ in Africa until the end of Summer; choosing to spend it in the Nova Scotian heat, a deep bond and the beach.

He is a deep, intelligent, insightful man, who appears to lead his crew, highly aware of the dangers, ramifications of his profession to his family, marriage and own life and of the consequences to his mind, body and spirit. However, he is also a man who passionately and authentically believes he must put his body and mind on the line in order to be truly happy. He likens himself and his peers to the type of men that simply must be ‘warriors’ who want and need to physically achieve and conquer. It is this resolve which leads him back to his vocation, year after year, with the knowledge that there only few individuals, who share his existence and know that it is one worth dying for.

Ultimately the miners feel disconnected and isolated from everyone other than each other as they feel no one else can comprehend the battles they have fought, the wounds they have endured and the sub-culture in which enables their survival.
Characters:

The Miner – An experienced, highly skilled and celebrated man who travels the world to work as a miner with full knowledge and awareness his actions and choices have on his family and him.

Miners Wife - A woman who has learnt to live without her husband, his absence and the dangers of his job by immersing herself into the role of the perfect housewife and mother. Her husband and her are comfortably and mutually estranged and disconnected.

The McKinnon mining crew – travel the world on aeroplanes and mine the most prestigious, difficult and dangerous mines in the world reaping millions for the mining companies but also much for themselves and their dependents.

Setting:

Begins in Cape Breton, a small Nova Scotian mining town, on a hot August day, where the miners have gathered at a ‘golden little beach’ which is isolated and hidden from the rest of the world. The story also takes the reader into the homes of the miner, the one he shares with his wife and children, when he is home, and to the mine at Springdale, Newfoundland where his brother lost his life mining.
Themes:
- Reflection
- Self discovery
- Subjective Reality
- Isolation
- Physicality and death
- Sexuality
- Pain
- Personal Achievement
- Hostility and violence
- Reality – shared and individual
- Memory
- Knowledge and Wisdom
- Time
- Kinship and comradery
- Shared experience

Significant quotes and Analysis:

- **Subjective reality and isolation:**

  ‘Yet, though I think I have caught glimpses of their joy, despair and disdain, it seems that in the end they must dance for themselves...in the end we are (all) only singing to ourselves..songs that for the most part (are) local and private and (in)capable of losing all of their substance in translation.’

- **Sexuality:**

  ‘In the future numbness of our flight to Africa we will find little that is sexual if it is to be like our other flights to such destinations.’
• **Reality – shared and Individual:**

- ‘My wife seems to have gone permanently into a world of avocado appliances and household cleanliness…She has perhaps gone as deeply into that life as I have gone into the life of the shafts…lost and separated and unavailable for communication.’

- ‘Many of us carry one shoulder permanently lower than the other where we have been hit by rockfalls…we have arms that we cannot raise above our heads…few of us have all our fingers….all of us are big men….we are all intensely aware of our bodies and the pains that course and twinge through them….lying now upon the beach we see the external scars on ourselves…we are not ready to leave….we are always expanding the perimeters of our seeing incarceration…we are big men engaged in perhaps the most violent of occupations…’

- ‘Musically, most of us have long abandoned the modern hits and gone, instead back to the Gaelic songs remembered from our early youth…I can almost physically feel the Summer of our marriage and of our honeymoon and of her singing the words of popular songs into my attentive ears… of which I had never heard.’

• **Hostility, pain and violence:**

- ‘I have always wished my children could see me at my work. That they might journey down with me in the dripping cage..or walk the eerie tunnels ..And that they might see how articulate we are in the accomplishment of what we do.. the perfection of our drilling and the calculation of our angles...information garnered by the most sophisticated of mining engineers.’

- ‘We have said farewells to our children, and to our wives, and I have offered kisses and looked into their eyes and wept outwardly and inwardly.’

• **Physicality and death**

- ‘Death in the shafts and in the drifts is always violent…most of us have accompanied the grisly remains of such bodies trussed up in plastic bags…
- ‘I have always wished to be better than mediocre and I have always wanted to use my body in the fulfilling of such a wish…bells, buzzers and curfews and deadlines...held little meaning.

**Symbols, Motifs, Imagery:**

- The weather - the significance of the change in the wind representing the end of sunshine and the beginning of their life in darkness yet again.

- The isolated beach - near the familial homes of the miners and their wives and children, used to symbolise the divide and shared knowledge of the miners and how estranged they are from those that do not share their realities.

- **Death and violence** - miners missing fingers, death of miners, miners horrific working conditions, death of his brother, gnarled, broken bodies, the heavy descriptions of the deaths of the miners and the shared horror of dealing with ‘the body so crushed up so blown apart that it cannot be reassembled properly.'
The Songs - representing a shared, mutual, exclusive culture that no matter what, can only be understood by the miners themselves. The “McKinnon’s Miners Choir’.

‘The warrior’ - the way the miners see themselves. He sees ‘beauty’ in what he does, in the ‘beauty of motion on the edge of violence. Physically he acknowledges how ‘huge and physical’ they all are and how ‘polished and eloquent in the propelling of their bodies toward their desired goals and in their relationships and dependencies (they have) on one another’.

The sea/beach - initially represents primordial, untouched natural beauty, where the miners can lie, naked and calm for just a short while. The sea washes away the ‘outlines of their bodies on the sand’ and the waves that are increasing in size signifying the men needing to lift and carry out their duties.

The graves and churchyards - house their dead relatives killed in the mines. Signifies their own possible inevitable dooms.

Language and Linguistic devices:
Metaphors
Juxtaposition
Narrative stance: First person narrative
Semantic fields
Paralinguistic features
Colloquialism
Allusion
Anecdote
Connotation
Euphemism
Sensory Details
Comparing and Contrasting
Empathy and Sympathy

Questions:
1. Find direct examples and quotations for each of the linguistic devices identified as being present in this story.
2. Write a short story from the miner’s wife’s perception of her husband and his existence.
3. Write paragraphs about the outcomes of the miner and his crew.
4. Discuss the connection/cycle of pride, loss of employment, trauma and poverty and self-actualisation.
5. Write 3 short paragraphs using the same narration style as Macleod, utilising 5 language and linguistic techniques listed above.
Summary

The narrator recalls a boyhood Christmas when he was 11 years old. He tells of the excited anticipation of Christmas as the family goes through the usual rituals in the month preceding the joyous event. He accompanies his brothers and sisters as they go from house to house with their pillowcases and joke with the youngest brother about Santa Claus. This is a happy time yet the narrator is troubled as he grapples with holding on to his belief in Santa knowing that he is at a transitional time moving from the carefree and protective world of childhood into adulthood. He is aware that his young brothers still believe fervently in Santa whereas his older sisters, who are thirteen and fifteen, have made this rite of passage. His father is sympathetic to his young son but the narrator is acutely aware of his father’s failing health.

As the middle of December approaches the weather gets colder and the family await the anticipated arrival of the older beloved brother from the lake boats on the Great Lakes of Ontario. He has sent boxes from his travels that have not been allowed to be opened. His arrival depends on the timing of the freezing of the lakes and the family waits impatiently for his return. There is a flurry of excitement and relief as the brother arrives on Christmas Eve with friends from the boats. The all sit in the warmth of the kitchen eating and drinking the family eagerly listening to the details of their trip. After the young men leave the children pounce on their brother and he affectionately tosses them in his arms. The final preparations are made with the cutting and decorating of the tree and then all the children, except the youngest, bundle into their coats and ride the sleigh to church with their brother in control of the splendid but wild horse. They are mesmerised by the beautiful sight of the church festooned with branches and glowing candles and emanating Christmas songs. They return home to a meal prepared by their mother and then the narrator is invited to stay up with his older siblings as the younger children go to bed. The older brother brings in the boxes that are filled with gifts for the family and the narrator realises that there is not a parcel ‘from Santa Claus’ for him. He feels keenly a sense of loss at moving from the world of childhood to adulthood but, as he looks at his caring and connected family, he heartened at joining them in this new world. His father’s final enigmatic words refer to this transition but also allude to another rite of passage from life to death – something his father is facing.
Characters
Narrator (11)
Kenneth (2 ½)
Bruce and Barry (6)
Anne (13)
Mary (15)
Neil (19)
Mother
Father

Setting
West Coast of Cape Breton
Christmas 1977

Themes
Loss of Childhood/transition to adulthood
Family relationships
Sibling bonds
Death
Resilience

Significant Quotes
‘For Christmas is a time of both past and present and often the two are perfectly blended. As we step into its newness we often look behind.’

‘I am troubled myself about the nature of Santa and I am trying to hang on to him in any way I can.’

‘He will be happy and strong and confident for us all.’

‘Yet I am not so much surprised as touched by a pang of loss at being here on the adult side of the world. It is as if I have suddenly moved into another room and heard a door click lastingly behind me. I am jabbed by my own small wound.’

‘All of them captured in the tableau of their care.’

“Every man moves on,” says my father quietly, and I think he speaks of Santa Claus, “but there is no need to grieve. He leaves good things behind.”
Symbols/Motifs

Coldness/Ice/Snow
Golden light
Warmth
Parcels
Santa Claus

Language devices

‘...when the first snow fell upon us as we moved like muffled mummers upon darkened roads.’ (p.209)

‘The large flakes were soft and new then and almost generous, and the earth to which they fell was still warm and as yet unfrozen.’ (p. 209)

‘A conspiracy of wool against the cold.’ (p.212)

‘The hens perch high on their roosts with their feathers fluffed out about them hardly feeling it worthwhile to descend to the floor for their few scant kernels of grain.’(p. 212)

‘The clothes my mother hangs on the line are frozen almost instantly and sway and creak from their suspending clothespins like sections of dismantled robots: the stiff-legged rasping trousers and the shirts and sweaters with unyielding arms outstretched.’(p. 212)

‘Their longed-for son and our golden older brother is here at last.’ (p.213)

‘This information falls tiredly but excitedly from their lips and we greedily gather it in.’ (p. 214)

‘The church is very beautiful with its festooned branches and glowing candles and the booming, joyous sounds that comes from the choir loft.’ (p. 216)

‘..we move like figures freed from a Christmas card.’ (p.216)

‘ the snow from the horse’s hooves falls about our heads like the whiteness of stars.’ (p.216)

Questions

1. How does MacLeod use language to differentiate this child-voice from that in ‘the Return’? How would you describe the difference?
2. The title is a biblical quotation (Ecclesiastes 3:1), also adapted in a Pete Seeger song that was a hit approximately a decade before this story was written. Find and read either the Bible verse or song lyrics. How does this story echo those themes and ideas?
'Second Spring' is one of the longest stories in the collection and is driven by a dense and detailed plot providing insight into the agricultural realities of farming. In this story, MacLeod steers away from the melancholy tone that he usually adopts; instead focusing on the cyclical nature of life and the lessons we learn.

The narrator is a boy in the seventh grade and lives on a farm. The story is told through the changing of the seasons and how life changes and adapts accordingly. The protagonist who is unnamed is fascinated in the life cycles of the farm animals and is already knowledgeable and accustomed to life on the farm.

The story is based around life in a country town, whereby the innocent intrusion into farming life creates a memorable incident that ultimately becomes benign after a passage of time.

Plans are set in place once a young agricultural representative arrives at the school and suggests the students start a "calf club" as a means of improving breeding practices. The young boy is eager to commit with the intention of raising a prize purebred calf. His father, however, is less receptive and feels that these representatives advance little that is not plain commonsense.

Finally the father agrees and the boy intends on using one of the better cows for breeding his “prized calf”. Although best laid plans come home to roost, as the boy realises the difficulties that arise when trying to tamper with nature. The boy accepts the outcome and moves on, turning his attention to Baseball and hinting that this was an activity, where unlike in the agricultural world, he feels that, "everything was under (his) control." He has learnt to accept his experiences, learns from them and moves on.

The boy’s father’s priorities clearly lie with the agricultural work that sustains his family. This work is dedicated by weather and the health and performance of the animals – factors often beyond his control. So when his son attempts to pursue his ‘calf club’ wish, an educational opportunity that the father tolerates, but has no time to waste on something that seems frivolous. There is an underlying tension here for the boy, as he tries to achieve things encouraged by his local school but also fulfil the family’s expectations of physical life and labour.
Setting:
Whilst the location of this story is not specified, it is predominantly set on a dairy farm in the country.

Characters:
• Young boy in the seventh grade
• Father
• Mother
• Grandfather’s cousin – unnamed
• Morag – Ayrshire cow

Themes/Big Ideas:
• Outsiders - older generation often resistant to outsiders whereas younger generation more accepting.
• Resilience- young boy is able to move on after his experience with the calf club
• Sexuality- in animals - a central part of all existence.
• Fate – the weather will always be uncontrollable eg. The storm
• Tradition – expectation that son will continue to work on the farm
• Transition - The boy has grown physically and mentally stronger over the twelve month period.
• The cycle of Life and death, of nature and the seasons - the beauty and cruelty of life
• Cyclical nature of life/seasons - note how these parallel
• Second Spring - regrowth, rebirth and regeneration.
• Uncertainty
• Inability to control/plan for life
• Death as universal, inevitable, unsparing truth – change in form, but continuity over time
• Contrast between modern and traditional methods of farming
• Interconnectedness of human, animal, environment
• Birth and death provide a constant in our lives
• Cycle of life continues despite intrusions
• Adapt and change

Narrative Style:
• First person narrator creates an immediate and direct connection to the reader. Child-like innocence but has a mature understanding of the world.

• MacLeod begins his story with a detailed and overly descriptive insight into the necessary activities and rituals of various seasons, focusing particularly on breeding cycles and butchering of animals. Perhaps MacLeod's point of sharing the graphic and confronting detail of the butchering of the animals highlights the realities of life.

• An interesting aside about MacLeod, the writer – “I write the conclusion when I’m half way through. I work really hard on a conclusion when I’m half way through because I say: “This is going to be the last thing that I say to the reader and it’d better be good or as good as I can make it”. And so the last lines of nearly all the stories I thought about.”

Language and Literary Devices:
• Humour – On pages 227 and 228 when discussing the various types of agricultural representative that would visit the students.
• Reflective storytelling
• Positive and accepting tone
• Use of anecdotes
• Repetition
• Contrasts - human v animal behaviour
• Characters are unnamed.
• Significant use of pronouns. Use of pronoun "He" instead of saying "bull". P.238

Symbols and Motifs:
• Animals – parallels can be drawn between human and animal behaviour
• The Seasons – passing of time; replicate significant changes of behaviour, in both animals and humans
• Young agricultural representative – intrusion of outside world; progress; transition.
• Calf Club – creates a sense of purpose and achievement; wealth
• Weather – provides hardship; significance of change; uncontrollable; growth

Significant Quotes:
• "Livestock buyers came, sometimes walking to the pastures to view their intended victims, offering prices, quoting possibilities, leaving and returning." (P.222)
• Intrusion of outside world; financial gain
• "Such scenes of selling and butchering would repeat themselves until a rough balance between livestock and available hay was achieved." (P.226)
• Maintaining a balance equilibrium in order to sustain a living
• “I say all of this now so that you might understand the environment in which the calf club wish was born, and also so that you might see the situation in which it existed for a while – wobbly and uncertain but grounded in a kind of realism similar to the animals and the people who were its basic source.” (p.226)
• Acknowledges as an adult, the possibility of failure but driven by possibility of potential
• "The selection of those who would remain and those who would "go" was always a tight and careful process." (P.226)
• "Like shrewd and thoughtful managers of athletic teams preparing their lists of protected players, we would go over the strengths and weaknesses of each individual." (P.226)
• Use of comparison/simile to demonstrate the strategies involved when weighing up decisions about livestock.
• "Those agricultural representatives are all the same." (P.229)
• The father is cynical and critical of “young” and “dynamic” agricultural representative who seems naïve in his approach to farming.
• "They come in their fancy cars..." (p.229)
• "We were still at our haying, although many of the fields had been cleared. We were all thinner and more irritable and beset by various nagging injuries..." (p.336)
• "During the summer months, while the animals grew sleek and fat and haughty, we, their human owners, would grow thin and burned and irritable." (P.220)
"He was mostly white but his head and neck were brindled grey which shaded at times almost blue. No formal heritage was visible in the way he looked and there was nothing like him in any book entitled 'Standard Breeds of Cattle'." (P. 238)

Repetition makes us aware of the boy’s disappointment, but this is dismissed by his joy of seeing the cow nurturing her calf.

Questions
1.) What is the significance of the title, ‘Second Spring’?

2.) Macleod begins his story on page 218 by stating, “Not a day went by without my touching them and the insistence of their presence affected the living of my life and the lives of the members of my family in very real and tangible ways. Their closeness and the manner of their closeness varied with the time of seasons.” What insights does the author reveal about life?

3.) Why does MacLeod begin with such a detailed and overly descriptive narrative of the necessary activities and rituals of various seasons?

4.) What is the father’s reaction to the “new agricultural representative”?

5.) Sometimes the nature of storytelling reveals another story within the plot. Where does this occur in ‘Second Spring’ and does this add another dimension to the story?

6.) MacLeod incorporates elements of humour in this story. Find evidence of this and discuss the impact.

7.) Define these terms:
   - Rambunctious
   - Melancholy
   - Cadaver
   - Lascivious

8.) Select 3 quotes and provide an analysis of each one.

9.) What does MacLeod reveal about Morag’s calf? How does he show this?

10.) What is your interpretation of the final paragraph of the story?
Winter Dog

Title

- “Winter Dog” – generic noun and adjective marry a recurring season to an animal – what is the effect? Which winter? Which dog? What does this highlight already about the nature of MacLeod’s storytelling? What is/are the story(ies) being told? What is the relationship between these stories?
- Winter – seasonal, cyclical, returning every year – past (and everything it contains) is never dead – resurfaces – memory is always waiting to be recollected
- Each life (human and non-human), and each generation in turn, has its own set of seasons/phases – natural patterns and repetitions over time

Your Turn:

With reference to the title, write a 150-250-word analytical paragraph on one of the following questions:

1. Which winter and which dog form the focus of this story?
2. How does MacLeod’s narrative style underscore the non-linear nature of human experiences?
3. What is the significance of the title to MacLeod’s collection (‘ISLAND’) as a whole?

Setting

1. Physical

- “December” – “winter storm” – “big ice” → isolation, danger, exploration, silence and quietude (peace?), play, excitement
- What dominates? – elemental forces of nature exposed in harsh (yet beautiful, even artful) natural environment – struggle for survival and self-preservation of humans (and animals?) foregrounded

2. Geo-spatial

- Where are we? Consider SPACES to be traversed – expanse of the continent (and, importantly, where is the initial point of origin? Why does this matter?)
3. Psychological

- How are the characters feeling at this point in time? Does this change throughout the story? Consider tonal/mood shifts – where do we start and where do we end? What knowledge/understanding/insight is gained and/or lost? What do the characters pine for?

Your Turn:

Write a 150-250-word analytical paragraph on one of the following questions:

1. How does winter act as a symbol in this story?
2. ‘The psychological settings of MacLeod’s stories are more significant than the physical environments in which action takes place.’ Discuss with reference to “Winter Dog”.
3. ‘MacLeod’s stories are particular to the Canadian experience of life.’ Discuss with reference to “Winter Dog”.

CHARACTERS

• Man (adult) / son (child) – characters (predominantly masculine) in these stories PAUSE within movement of life to take stock – quiet power of reflection – redeeming strength that confers complexity
• Children vs adults – how are their worlds both similar and very different?
• Wife – passivity of women? Delineation of roles? Acceptance of place (in “her” bed – symbolic?)
• Ill man – “he” – why unnamed, anonymous subject? Obviously he is the root of the (dispersed) family – the nexus, focal point from which everything has been distributed (like the dog? Progenitor?)
• Men – silent, drink, power of their “word” (p. 252 – honour bound with speech)
• Community – spectating? Providing checks and balances to individuals/families? Why might this a) be and b) be accepted?
• Strangers (extension of community?) – How are they received? What does this illustrate?
• Dog (“golden collie-like dog”) – link to Scotland (why does this matter?) – consider energy and gusto associated with the free dog who “bounds into [the scene’s] midst...darts and dodges between their legs and through their outstretched arms” – contrast with shackled dog – “what does he know?”
• Seal – immortalised – what does this symbol represent?
• Nature itself – active force – power to do what?
Your Turn:

Complete one of the tasks below:

1. Identify as many binary pairs/oppositions in these characters/character groups as possible (min. 4). For each pair, write one statement that analyses how MacLeod has utilised characterisation to convey a key idea.

2. Who is the main character of this story? Provide a 150-250-word justification.

MACLEOD’S NARRATIVE STYLE: Linguistic Structures and Features

- Narrative voice: first person narrative – “I” – masculine voice is simultaneously of father/son – drifts in recollections to “we” – child/dog – bound together in joint adventure/exploration, desire for freedom and life/death
- Interjections of narrative (authorial?) voice – recalling us to present – where it is safe and he has survived – story takes on significance of a parable
- Reflective tone – especially at the end – cyclical “winter storm” brings us back to present moment/musing of spectating father – but not judgmental - compassionate
- Italicised chunk of direct speech – FEAR speaks
- Continually changing referents – “he” – reader has to continually renegotiate story and reorient/regain bearings – twists and turns in the subjective experience of narrator that reader experiences/is conjoined to – which is how the mind works – non-linear and dislocating
- Story triggering story – digressions – what is this story actually about? – is this how our memory networks operate? Are our daily experiences (and thus the sum total of our lives) actually linear, ever-progressive and controlled? – events/sights acting as catalyst for memory eg. door of room from shipwreck
- Plane of thought vs plane of memory vs plane of action – narrative multilayered – multiple realities existing simultaneously: ADJACENCY
- Sudden shifts towards particularity – “Then out of the corner of my eye I see him” – narrative turns – use of flashbacks
- Sentencing – many (adverbial) fragments that determine pacing of narrative – slowing, reflecting, abruptly shifting, detaching

Example: “People hoping to find objectivity in the most subjective of situations. Strung out in uncertainty across time zones from British Columbia to Newfoundland.” (p. 251)

- Fragmented sentencing mirrors fragmentation of people across time, space and experience
- Contrasts, tensions and oppositions – children vs adults, excitement vs risk – movement vs paralysis
- Irony – ice is “too dry” for snowmen, eventual death of dog
Your Turn:

- How does MacLeod’s narrative style mirror the themes in this story? Respond by either creating a table (with 5 points) OR in a 150-250-word analytical paragraph. Provide an example from the story for each stylistic element identified.

**Ballad and folklore**

- Oral storytelling – writer/speaker addressing and implicating reader/listener directly
- Impetus of story is telling the tale – and through it forging/perpetuating sense of identity (self within the clan/community/culture) – from individual to collective significance
- Little dialogue – stories evolve through recalling and describing action that has occurred in the past
- Traditional concerns: love, death, friendship, family ties, clan loyalties
- Language very emotive
- Literature as monument to the dead – not defeated in time despite defeat in moment
- Lifts personal loss to a level of understanding (belief/mysticism) that embraces necessary compromises of life into overall essence of what it means to be human

Your Turn:

- Using 3 examples, demonstrate how this story is told to us as listeners rather than as readers.

**Symbolism**

- Snow – for children, simplicity and purity of childhood; silence and quietude (peace) BUT deceptiveness
- Drifting snow – unsettled and thus unpredictable – cover, loss of visibility/vision, disorientation – fear
- Winter – “it was winter when he came”
- Big ice – “marked the official beginning of the coldest part of winter” – “the stretch of smooth ice had been deceivingly and temporarily joined to the rougher ice” – nature can change in an instant (“fickle weather”)
- “the perfect seal” – “frozen perfection” – “rime of frost” (consider lexical connections)
- Seeing – child cannot see (what?) – eyes frozen shut
- Sea – uncertainty, death, power, adventure, generosity, beauty
- Artifice – “stage”, “painting”, “scene” – recurring motif
- Mummers - !
Your Turn:

Respond to one of the questions/tasks below:

1. Choose one of the symbols used by MacLeod in this story and explain what it denotes.
2. How do the symbols used by MacLeod in this story echo the concerns of the collection as a whole?

Big ideas

1. **How we live in the face of risk/uncertainty** – children abandon themselves to adventure (courting death) – sudden awakening to danger – BUT adults “[know] the possibilities” (concern, preoccupation) and remain paralysed, rooted, unable to move (towards love, connection, life, death -?) - consequence of experience – what is gained, what is lost? Is the narrator mourning or celebrating as he is watching his children revel in the snow? – the gaining of wisdom and perspective that is the fruit of a reflective nature

2. Natural instinct of animals means the must always be on guard – humans become distracted and suspend this – run into danger – but, we are different to the animals (?) – perhaps makes us more vulnerable BUT leads to life of cultivation, art and exploration – **risk we take is price we pay for beauty and truth**

3. **Children as explorers**, in the moment – not thinking about potential consequences and “possibilities”

4. **Dawning realisations** – not wanting to seem “disobedient or considered a fool” – EGO (perhaps denotes shift from childhood to adulthood – awareness
AND mask) – “I was never to tell anyone of the afternoon’s experience, or that he had saved my life” – fear, ego, pact, loyalty, shared experience of near-death

5. **Bridging vast distances** – time, space, experience, generations, personhood

6. **Human frailty, fallibility and fear** – what could happen, unpredictability, inability to communicate and attempts to cope

7. **Private worlds** where things happen and pass without others knowing – children playing, near-death encounter on the ice, dog saving life

8. **Primal instincts** for survival, self-preservation and self-perpetuation (dog) – what, then, distinguishes man and beast in this primitive landscape and in this elemental world?

9. **Relationship between humans and animals** – saved dog despite danger posed to self, as did dog

10. Contrast between dog and seal in water – one sinks because of its gravity (despite beauty), and one struggles for survival and lives – desperate MOVEMENT – **life inextricably tied to movement** – to stand still is to die “still, there was nothing to do but go forward” (despite the elegiac tone)

11. **Life is seen in continuity and as communal** – dog threatened stability and safety of neighbourhood and propagation of seed of other dogs – BALANCE – was wild and not measured or constrained, driven by impulse

**The “collected stories”**

**How does this story fit within the wider collection?**

- Humans and animals – relationships in a harsh and unforgiving existence where sentimentality is a luxury
- Harsh landscapes – fraught with beauty and danger
- Death and beauty – life and death – always linked together, and to nature – both giver and taker (eg. sea – livelihood and grave)
- Memories – present triggering past – persistence of the past – enduring nature of what is gone to colour the present – continuity of our lives – lives not linear – sustaining and connecting (to what?)
Where are the women? Highly gendered experience of the world – what is MacLeod positing (if anything)?

Continuity between generations – deep ancestral lines linking and conferring identity

Tainted ancestries and bloodlines - “he seemed to be at least part German Shepherd” – uncertainty of who we are and whence we are descended – desire to pin down our identity

Always recalling PLACE – lost places eg. Scotland – points of origin from which all have been dispersed/displaced/dispossessed – desire to locate oneself, family, genealogy

World of children vs world of adults – innocence vs experience

Life a series of stages/phases – surety in cycle but continually dislodged and destabilised by memory, desire, accidents that cannot be accounted/prepared for

Singing – celebration, joy, oral tradition, storytelling, link with ancestry

Vision – not being able to see/being blinded (figuratively as well as physically – momentarily or prolonged)

**Your Turn:**

1. Create a thematic mindmap linking “Winter Dog” to the other stories in this collection (at least 3).
2. Create a Wordle that visually represents MacLeod’s key concerns as depicted through this story.
3. Create a diagram linking this short story to the title of the collection, “Island”.

**Some significant quotes**

“We ourselves have been nervous and restless for the past weeks. We have been troubled by illness and uncertainty in those we love far away on Canada’s east coast. We have already considered and rejected driving the fifteen hundred miles. Too far, too uncertain, too expensive, fickle weather, the complications of transporting Santa Claus.” (p. 250)

- Being risk-averse and calculating all possibilities stifles movements and spontaneity
- Adults’ desire for security of certainty – anxiety of what cannot be controlled

“Through the window and out on the white plane of the snow, the silent, laughing children now appear. They move in their muffled clothes like mummers on the whitest of stages. They dance and gesture noiselessly, flopping their arms in parodies of heavy, happy, earthbound birds. They have been warned by the eldest to be aware of the sleeping neighbours so they cavort only in pantomime, sometimes raising mittened hands to their mouths to suppress their joyous laughter. They dance and prance in the moonlight, tossing now in one another’s direction, tracing out various shapes and initials, forming lines which snake across the previously unmarked
whiteness. All of it in silence, unknown to the unseen and unheard by the neighbouring world. They see unreal even to me, their father, standing at his darkened window. It is almost as if they have danced out of the world of folklore like happy elves who cavort and mimic and caper through the private hours of this whitened dark, only to vanish with the coming of the morning’s light and leaving only the signs of their activities behind. I am tempted to check the recently vacated beds to confirm what perhaps I think I know.” (p. 252)

• Unreality of childhood – stages of man – the season of childhood will pass
• FOOLISH – life as self-deceptive act – absurdity of our play in the face of realities of life
• Moments of light-heartedness, exuberance, frivolity and being carefree – only children can afford – adult is SPECTATOR of these (private) acts of abandon – looking on with wonder – time slowed down and suspended with the adult’s detailed descriptions of the moment

“He is touched but never captured, which is the nature of the game. Then he is gone. As suddenly as he came. I strain my eyes in the direction of the adjoining streets, toward the house where I have often seen him, always within a yard enclosed by woven links of chain... I look once more toward the fenced-in yard by the dog is nowhere to be seen.” (p. 253-4)

• Animal nature is to be free, wild, untamed, undomesticated, unbounded, TRUE to own characteristics (integrity of being)
• Visions, hallucinations, cannot trust validity of what we see (things “seem” – not “are” – uncertainty introduced through modality) – perhaps can trust only what we intuit?

“On the few occasions when he did go behind them, he was “rough”, which meant that instead of being a floating, nipping, suggestive presence, he actually bit them and caused them to gallop, which was another sin. Sometimes in the summer the milk cows suffering from his misunderstood pursuit would jam pell mell into the stable, tossing their wide horns in fear, and with their great sides heaving and perspiring while down their legs and tails the wasted milk ran in rivulets mingling with the blood caused by his slashing wounds. He was, it was said, “worse than nothing.” / Gradually everyone despaired, although he continued to grow grey and golden and was, as everyone agreed, a “beautiful-looking dog”. / He was also tremendously strong...”

• Nature not accepted, unable to be constrained within limits society seeks to impose
• Beauty and virility and potency tinged with violence and danger

“It drifted down with the dropping temperatures, bringing its own mysterious coldness, and stretching for hundreds of miles in craters and pans, sometimes in
grotesque shapes and sometimes in dazzling architectural forms. It was blue and white and sometimes grey and at other times a dazzling emerald green. The dog and I changed our direction towards the sea, to find what the ice might yield. Our land had always been beside the sea and we had always gone toward it to find newness and the extraordinary...kegs of rum had washed up, and sometimes bloated horses and various fishing paraphernalia and valuable timber and furniture from foundered ships. The door of my room was apparently the galley door from a ship called the Judith Franklin which was wrecked during the early winter in which my great-grandfather was building his house...A sort of symbolic marriage of the new and the old: doors and shelving, stairways, hatches, wooden chests and trunks and various glass figurines and lanterns which were miraculously never broken......People came too. The dead as well as the living. Bodies of men swept overboard and reported lost at sea, and the bodies of men still crouched within the shelter of their boats’ broken bows.” (p. 257-9)

- Horrific and macabre images side by side treasures – life tied to disaster
- Long ancestral lines
- Sometimes fragility is preserved intact
- Sea as both livelihood and grave – giving and generous and taking and treacherous – life and death always linked

“But the seal was dead, yet facing us in a frozen perfection that was difficult to believe. There was a light powder of snow over its darker coat and a delicate rime of frost still formed the outline of its whiskers. Its eyes were wide open and it stared straight ahead towards the land. Even now in memory it seems more real than reality – as if it were transformed by frozen art into something more arresting than life itself. The way the sudden seal in the museum exhibit freezes your eyes with the touch of truth. Immediately I wanted to take it home.” (p. 259-60)

- Power of nature to create beauty – beauty and truth (art) in death
- Encounter with elemental force of nature
- Desire for possession of beauty – treasure – “my trophy” – human attachment and desire for glory and conquest leading to danger and disaster
- Focus and intent shifted away from survival (whilst dog, in the meantime, is “uneasy” and “began to whine” – instincts suspended in the boy)
- How can memory be more powerful than the reality we are living in any given moment? relationship between emotion and memory vs. “having, say, crepes for dinner” (MacLeod, 2008)
“We had been spared for a future time” (p. 262) – inevitability of death – refrain (p. 266 – “spared again”, p. 268 – “he was not to be saved for a future time any more”)

- Acceptance that death is a matter of time
- Who is doing the sparing? Passive voice denotes greater powers at work – mysterious, fateful, ironic – mercy in being saved at these moments

“Two winters later I was sitting at a neighbour’s kitchen table when I looked out the window and saw the dog as he was shot… the little blood he had left dropped red and black on the winter snow” (p. 267)

- Brutal and violent shock of the pared back, unsentimental, stark sentencing
- Unexpected irony – instincts of dog no match for human power – unjust, uneven power distribution – not level playing field
- Death can take place suddenly in moments of calm – despite dog having proved worth when it mattered
- Life is not fair, cannot expect it to be
- Staining purity of child(hood)

“He was with us only for a while and brought his own changes, and yet he still persists. He persists in my memory and in my life and he persists physically as well.” (p. 269)

- Continuity in change

Your turn: interpretation and criticism

1. This story is about... (key ideas, incorporating quotes where you can) – write 10 complex sentences
2. MacLeod sets his story in a world where...(physical, geospatial, psychological, cultural, socioeconomic, historical setting) – write 6 complex sentences
3. MacLeod’s characterization reveals the complexities in human nature by...(focus on characterization) – write 5 complex sentences
4. MacLeod’s utilization of...(linguistic structure/feature) enables him to highlight...(effect) – write 5 complex sentences
The Tuning of Perfection

Summary:

Archibald is a very precise and traditional man who lives alone on top of a mountain. His wife and baby die in childbirth and he is left with three daughters who later go to live with his wife’s sisters. His twin brother dies in the same week as his wife. Neat and uncompromising, he is also a skilled singer of traditional Gaelic songs that tell of his family’s Scottish heritage. As a somewhat renowned talent in this discipline, he is approached by a television producer to consider singing (along with his family) at a ‘Scots around the world’ spectacular in Halifax. His family is furious when he decides he cannot compromise or shorten the songs to suit the producer’s requirements. The performance opportunity is then given to an uncouth local, Carver, who has no qualms about altering the songs. In an unexpected conclusion, an unlikely and rare moment of deep understanding is shared between the traditional Archibald and the coarse Carver. It is at this moment that Archibald realises that it is ironically the uncouth (and seemingly uncultured) Carver who represents more of his cultural heritage than any of his own family.

Key characters

Archibald - 78 years old, patriarch, traditional Gaelic singer. He is attempting to stem the tide against the gradual drift of his culture.

Carver – ‘a violent young man in his thirties’, ultimately sings in the spectacular in Halifax.

Compare and contrast Archibald and Carver.

Archibald is deliberate, precise and thoughtful. Carver is quick to make decisions and
not restricted by over-analysing, always certain and, he has nothing to lose, “Us, we’re adjustable”.

- **Who is Carver representative of? Think about the class system in Scotland.**

**Sal** (or Sarah) – Archibald’s granddaughter

- **What kind of woman does she represent?**

**MacKenzie family**

- **Who do they represent?**

**Archibald’s extended family**

**TV producers** (and their audience – who do they consist of?)

**Natural environment/animal life**

**Deceased wife (vs Cora?)**

- **Consider role of folklorists in this story and in ‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’ (consumption of culture).**

**Themes**

- Old values/traditions being eroded- consider also when Archibald learns that his mare is to be kept in foal. He is disheartened at the way respect for nature, life, and honesty is gradually diminishing. He is saddened when he discovers that his recently sold mare will not be used in a traditional manner, instead she will be kept in foal so that her urine can be used by a pharmaceutical company in the manufacture of contraceptive pills. Furthermore, he is also fearful for the reappearing and symbolic eagles as their traditional habitats are damaged by pesticides and herbicides. (*The eagles may be seen as symbols of Archibald and his wife’s love). 

- music and its link to culture and heritage (Link to hear one of the Gaelic songs mentioned in this story: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHe2H2WOQXs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHe2H2WOQXs))

- identity as being shaped by the landscape;
• Gaelic heritage (and perhaps the yearning to be elsewhere or in another time?)
• Death (including the death of a culture; death of the Gaelic language)
• love
• sexuality
• loneliness
• reality vs representation of reality/”show” (consider presentation of Gaelic heritage ‘Scots Around the World’) vs perceptions
• what we are willing to compromise

Quotes:
“He and his wife had been the same age and were almost consumed by one another while they were still quite young.” -p274
“…they often sang together and the language of their singing was Gaelic.” -p275
“Only the monogamous eagles who nested in the hemlock tree even farther up the mountain seemed above them”. -p277
“And he felt terribly alone.” -p278
“And he had come to be regarded as “the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers.” -280
“She wore a tight-fitting T-shirt with the words ‘I’m Busted’ across her chest.” -283
“Oh, who cares?... It’s the trip that’s important.” -284
“I just make the noises.” -285
“...they keep them bred all the time and they use their water for birth control pills.” -290
“You can’t cut them like that...if you do, they don’t make any sense.” -298
“He thought of the impossibility of trimming the songs and of changing them and he wondered why he seemed the only one in his group who harboured such concerns. “-302
“It’s just a bunch of nonsense syllables strung together.” -303
“Archibald looked at all the liquor and was moved by the total inappropriateness of the gift; bringing all of this to him, the most abstemious man on the mountain. Somehow it moved him even more. And he was aware of its cost in many ways.”-309
“We really know. “ -309
Narrative structure:

- This story, unlike most of the others in the collection, is told in the third-person. Why would MacLeod choose to do this?
- Consider how MacLeod describes Archibald, he uses plain and practical language. What devices does he use? Why would he choose these techniques?
- How does MacLeod reveal the sense that Archibald is culturally displaced?

Questions:

- How do individual characters/character groups resonate with one another (consider contrasts)?
- How does MacLeod emphasise that Archibald struggles with the transition to new ways?
- How does the character of Carver highlight that those who are able to adapt will be successful?
- What is the purpose of the inclusion of the eagles in this story? How do the eagles enhance the story?
- How does MacLeod create such a strong sense of place in this story?
- What role does music and song play in this story?
- What ideas do we understand from this story that are integral to our understanding of the collection?
The story of **Vision** begins with the following:

‘I don’t remember when I first heard the story but I remember the first time I heard it and remembered it. By that I mean the first time it made an impression on me and more or less became mine; sort of went into me in such a way that I knew it would not leave me again but would remain there forever.’ pg. 321.

These first sentences outline the crux of the story.

This is one of the longest and most complex stories in the collection. Its complexity lies in the myriad of stories running through the story. The stories interrelate and meet at some point, but it is worthwhile plotting the subplots as you are reading, and tracking where they meet in conclusion.

**The fishing excursion**

Introduction of the narrator, and his father Alex.

They return from catching lobsters to sell to the waiting trucks. It is the final day of the season.

Times have changed in the small fishing village. Once lobsters were food for the poor man, now they are prized as a delicacy.

The introduction of Kenneth MacAllester, the narrator and Kenneth were childhood friends, but not now.
The narrator’s family and the MacAllester’s had an ‘understanding’ about fishing boundaries, but these had been changed due to need. This causes a rift between the two families.

Kenneth McAllester’s Scottish ancestors’ 2nd sight

When the narrator and Kenneth were friends, Kenneth told a story about his Grandmother.

She had descended from a man in Scotland, Kenneth Munro or MacKenzie who possessed *Da Shealladh*, two sights, or second sight, and that ‘by looking through a hole in a magical white stone he could see distant contemporary events as well as those of the future’ pg 326.

Nearly all of his visions came true.

Kenneth Munro or MacKenzie’s eye was blind ‘in the sense of ordinary sight’ pg 327 but he told a gathered group that a husband, on a trip to Paris, was being disloyal to a wife.

The enraged wife ordered Kenneth’s execution, but before he was killed, he hurled the white stone as far as he could into a lake, and told the lady that the family would ‘come to an end years hence…… when there was a deaf-and dumb father who would outlive his four sons and then all their lands would pass into the hands of strangers.’ Pg 327

This prophecy came true.

Angus and Alex’s adventurous journey

At 11, Alex and Angus (twin brothers) wanted to visit their grandmother on a neighbouring Island, Canna.

They had been pestering their parents to let them go for weeks, and the answers was always, ‘we will see’ pg 329. And ‘wait and see’ pg 331.

One day, the twin’s paternal grandmother ‘read’ their teacups (tea leaves) pg 331.

“You are going on a journey,” she said peering into the teacups as she turned them in her hands. “You are going to cross water. You will meet a mysterious woman who
has dark hair. She will be quite close to you. And... she, said turning the cups in her hands to see the formation of the leaves better, “and...oh...oh.... oh.” Pg 331.

Once arriving in Canna, the twins set off on their journey to their Grandmother’s house. They were picked up along the way by an old man in a buggy who stopped and offered them a ride.

The twins arrive at what they think is their Grandmother’s house, but they are not certain that it is. The description of their visit to the blind old lady’s house is detailed – it’s worth reading this closely pg 335-340. There is an ominous feel to the visit. The boys are frightened of the old lady. Sight and vision can be read into much of this section. Firstly, the old woman is blind – yet there is an air of mystery to her. She has ‘relatives in Kintail’ and she has a ‘long association with the name Alex’ pg 338.

Upon leaving she says to the boys:

‘Do you know where you are going?’ she asked.

‘Can you see your way in the dark?’

‘We will meet again?’ she said, raising her voice to form a question. Pg 339.

‘Some are more loyal than others,’ she said. ‘Remember that.’ Pg 340.

When the leave Canna, they pass the old lady in their Grandfather’s buggy:

“Cò a th’ann? Cò a th’ann? Who’s there? Who’s there?

But their Grandfather said nothing.

“Who’s there? She called. Who’s there? Who’s there?”

“Don’t say anything,” said their grandfather, under his breath.

“I don’t want her to know you’re here” pg 348.

‘They lowered their heads as if she could see them’ pg 349.

When they returned to Kintail, news arrived that there had been a death in Canna. ‘The old woman’s house had burned and she within it.’ Pg 352.

The twin’s parents immediately leave for Canna.
St Columba of Colum Cille

Grandfather tells the boys the story of St Columba of Colum Cille, ‘brilliant, dedicated missionary in Ireland and he possessed Da Shealladh, the second sight, and used a stone to ‘see’ his visions.’ Pg 345.

Grandfather tells the boys that: ‘….sometimes I feel that I know him and I think I see him as well’ pg 347.

The complex love triangle between Mac an Amharius and the sisters

The twins enlist in the army and meet a young man from Canna.

He knows the boy’s grandfather, Alex, Mac an Amharius.

Mac an Amharius translates to ‘Son of Uncertainty’ – ‘which meant that he was illegitimate or uncertain as to his father was.’ Pg 355.

“Some say,” said the young man, “that he sowed as much seed as the stallion and who knows who might be descended from him. If only we knew, eh?” he added with a laugh. Pg 355.

He became possessed of Da Shealladh, the second sight.

Pages 355 – 356 talk of his ‘visions’ and it is worth reading these carefully.

We then hear of the love triangle between Mac an Amharius and two sisters. It is a gripping tale on pages 357 and 358 culminating in one sister giving birth to twin girls. One died, but the other survived. A doctor attended the house some time later:

“He said that the mother had lost a great deal of blood and he thought she might have lacerated her eyes during the birth with her long fingernails and that infection has set in, caused perhaps by the unsanitary conditions with in the barn. He was not sure if she would live and, if she did, he feared her sight would never be restored.” Pg 358.

On page 359, the narrator concludes:

‘This, I guess is my retelling of the story told by the young man of Canna to my father and his brother when they were all young and on the verge of war. All the information that spilled out of him came because it was there to be released and he was revealing more than he realized to his attentive listeners. The story was told in Gaelic, and as the people say, “It is not the same in English,” although the images are true.’

So we can conclude that the twin’s grandmother was the old blind woman.
Alex’s WW2 experiences

The narrator tells the story of his father at war in Normandy, France. He describes a ‘wall of orange flame and a billowing wave of black smoke’.

Pg 360:

‘It rose before him even as he felt the power of the strong hand upon his left shoulder. The grip was so powerful that he felt the imprint of the fingers almost as a bruise: and even as he turned his searing eyes, he fell back into his own language. “Cò a th’ann?” he said. “Cò a th’ann? Who’s there?” And in the instant before his blindness, he recognized the long brown fingers on his shoulder with their pointed fingernails caked in dirt. “Se me-fhin,” she said quietly, “It is myself.” ’

Later on the same day of his father’s blindness Mac an Amharuis, his grandfather, died. He had developed cataracts and ‘did not recognize, either by sight or sound, any of the people around him.’ Pg 361.

The Legion Hall Family Feud

On pg 361, the narrator again muses to the reader:

‘When I began this story I was recounting the story which my father told me as he faced the green hills of Canna on the last day of the lobster season a long time ago.’

He reminds us that the other storytellers in this story were the young man from Canna and this father’s twin brother.

We are transported back to the Lobster wharf and to Legion Hall where the narrator, his father and his Uncle are drinking beer. Also in the hall are the MacAllester’s. A fight breaks out and Kenneth MacAllester loses an eye. The two families agree to cooperate rather than set boundaries for fishing in the future.
The framing device: the narrator with his young daughter.

The story concludes with the narrator addressing us again:

‘This has been the telling of a story about a story but like most stories it has spun off into others and relied on others and perhaps no story really stands alone’ pg 366.

The complex subplots are summarized as follows:

‘This began as the story of two children who long ago went to visit their grandparents but who, because of circumstances, did not recognize them when they saw them. As their grandparents did not see them. And this is a story related by a man who is a descendant of those people. The son of a father who never saw his son but knew him only through sound or by the running of fingers across the features of his face.’ Pg 366-7.

The narrator talks of his own daughter who asks him a riddle:

“What has eyes but cannot see?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“A potato,” she shouts.

‘She is the great-great-granddaughter of the blind woman who died in flames and of the man called Mac an Amhauris; and both of us, in spite of our age and comprehension, are indeed children of uncertainty.’ Pg 367.

Excerpt of an Interview with the writer:

The title of the story, ‘Vision’ gives the reader a clue to what the story is about. In an interview about the story, MacLeod said:

‘Vision’ was my story about vision. So I just put everything in there I could think of about sight, about literal sight: people who can see certain things and people who can’t see certain things, you have the colour blind test for your driver’s licence at some places; and people who can see the future, like second sight, like what happens when you go to the fortune-teller, or people who can see the past very clearly, people who remember the past. People who are literally blind, who can’t see anything literally but can see in other ways. People who can see things but are too stupid to see what they do see. Like in families, someone is neglecting the middle child and you say “Do you ever notice that you pay all your attention to your oldest daughter and your youngest daughter?” “Oh, I didn’t see, I can’t see that”.

So ‘Vision’ is a long complicated story with all those people in it who can see things and can’t see things. And the other kind of image I had in this story was... it is about what will I say – illegitimacy. Sometimes people are seeing people and they don’t know that these people are their grandparents because they were raised in the house
down the road. So they are seeing people and they think of them as Neighbour Brown and then later they see the truth or someone reveals to them the truth, that Neighbour Brown is really their grandmother. So I was interested in all those possibilities of what we see and what we don’t see, about people who want to see things, people who don’t want to see things.

I don’t know about the geography affecting your eyes, but maybe it does for people who are in the Arctic a lot, they suffer from snow-blindness. People get sand in their eyes a lot and people who work in certain professions, as I said before, or work in physical professions, they lose their eyes, they lose other parts of themselves, they lose their hands, they lose their feet because of the nature of their work.

Source: ‘Journal of the Short Story in English’, Linda Collinge and Jacques Sohier, Autumn 2003

Activities

It is worth tracking within the story MacLeod’s references to sight.

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<td>Kenneth MacAllester</td>
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<td>Kenneth Munro or MacKenzie pg 326.</td>
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78
People who see for the first time – something is revealed to them.

Other references to sight, seeing, vision

Through tracking MacLeod’s use of sight, you will also see the amalgam of themes within his collection of stories. Often, the themes link within the stories.

Tradition

- *Through obligation, ties to cultural values etc.*
- Those that can see the past /remember the past
- Those that can see certain things, people who wants to see things.
- Those that can’t see certain things or don’t want to see certain things

Education/Literature

- Those who are too stupid to see what they see
- People who see for the first time – something is revealed to them.

Outsiders and belonging

- Those that can see the future/second-sight – MacLeod uses mysticism, superstition and alienation.

Death

Isle of Skye, August 2016
Summary

An elderly woman sits at the window of her house on the island and looks across to the mainland and reflects on her past. She explores her past – her birth on the island and her family history. She recalls the story of the way her grandfather died on the island from ‘a pain in his side’ and the difficult journey to the mainland, on a small skiff, to tell of his death. His widow continued to maintain the job of working the lighthouse after his death. Over the years the family continued to work and live on the island and slowly their identity became entwined with that of the island. By the time the woman was born the intertwined history of her family and the island was already far advanced. A wharf was built to ‘service’ the lighthouse but also attracted mainland fishermen in the lobster season. When the woman is seventeen a young ‘red-haired’ boy arrives on a fishing boat. During the fishing season they secretly meet and form a close bond and, one day, he asks her to marry him. After a night of love-making, he leaves promising to return the next season the take her to ‘live someplace else.’ She waits for him over the winter, anticipating the prospect of marriage and when the boats return, she looks for him. She finds out, from a casual remark made by her father, that the boy was killed while working in the woods. She is shocked and cannot believe that news of such ‘outstanding impact’ could arrive in such a way. Soon after she discovers she is pregnant and goes to the mainland to have her baby. After the birth of her baby she decides to leave her daughter with her aunt and returns to the island to help her elderly parents maintain the lighthouse. When her father falls ill they all return to the mainland leaving her brother to look after the lighthouse. When he mysteriously disappears she returns to the island with her parents leaving her child to be raised by her aunt. Her parents become less and less able to work on the island and eventually her father reluctantly goes to the island insisting his wife go with him. Soon after her father dies and, ten days later, her mother. The woman continues to tend the lighthouse on her own. She is visited by a group of men from a visiting fishing boat and has a frenzied afternoon of lovemaking with them. As the years pass she becomes more careless of her appearance and more eccentric and is regarded as the ‘mad woman of the island.’ Gradually over the years things change – the Government build a new wharf and the fisherman stop coming to stay in the island. Visitors stop coming to the island and tourist boats arrive taking trips around the island. Eventually, the lighthouse is officially closed and she is told that the light will still shine but it will be maintained by modern technology. At the end of the story the lines between reality and imagination seem to blur as the woman is visited by a boy who claims to be her grandson and another who seems to be her long-dead love who takes her away on his boat.
Running commentary

Opening passages

References to rain

• ‘slanted’
• ‘pinging sound’
• ‘delicate, beaded curtain’

References to the fire

• ‘old fence posts or timber’
• ‘ancient nails’
• hot fire that ‘glowed a cherry red’
• reference to ‘coffins’

Wetness

• ‘wetness of their coats’ (dogs)
• ‘odour of damp woollen garments’

Q. Why does Alistair Macleod begin this story with the detailed descriptions of the rain, the fire and the dampness?

She looks and thinks she can see the island but because of her failing eyesight she is not sure if she can actually see the island or remembered it.

The mainland - now with paved roads, cars, shopping centres, white houses and red or grey barns. The island id lit up at night from the lights.

“It all seemed more glamorous at night, perhaps because of what you could not see, and conversely a bit more disappointing in the day.’

Q. This is the only story with a female protagonist. Why, do you think? This is also one of very few written in the third person. How does this influence our understanding of the lives of these people?

The story of her birth

• The ice on the channel would not bear the weight of a horse and sleigh to go to the mainland
• She is born on the island
• When she is taken across to the island the old clergyman records the wrong birthplace, the wrong date and the wrong name. She is recorded as Angus rather than Agnes.

Q. What is significant about the way all the details of Agnes’s life are recorded incorrectly?

Her grandfather’s death

• His body is stretched out on the kitchen table and covered with sheets
• They do not know what to do as there was no adequate radio communication and they were not strong enough to launch the boat.
• They launch a small skiff with a tub in the prow to light a fire to attract attention.
The boat is rowed by the ‘desperate hands of the woman and her children.’
Someone sees the fire, they are towed in to the wharf and comforted.

Q. **What key parts of this story show how life is very difficult for the family but also the way they face challenges with great fortitude?**

**Death**

‘The original family had gone to the island because of death or rather to aid in death’s reduction.’

- The lighthouse was established to warn sailors of the danger of the island.
- Before the establishment of the lighthouse there were a number of wrecks.

‘Their skeletons had been found accidentally by fisherman in the spring – huddled under trees or outcrops of rock in the positions of their deaths. Some still had the remains of their arms around one another. Some still with tattered, flapping clothes covering their bodies although the flesh between the clothing and the bones was no longer there.’

Q. **Death is here described in concrete, objective language. Why does AM adopt this style?**

**Isolation**

- ‘In answer to the question of isolation, they told themselves they would get used to it.’
- ‘...coming ...from a people in the far north of Scotland’ they told themselves ‘they were already used to it.’
- Their ancestors were often away for years in isolated places ‘talking only to dogs or to themselves or to imaginary people who blended into ghosts.’
- In the early days there was no adequate radio communication and if they were in trouble they would light fires in the hope someone would see them.

Q. **What is significant about the references to ‘ghosts’ and how does this influence our interpretation of the events at the end of the story?**

**Names/identity**

- The family’s name gradually became intertwined with that of the island.
- The island became known as MacPhedran’s Island
- They became known as people ‘of the island’
- They were identified as ‘John the island’ or ‘Mary of the island.’
- ‘As if in giving their name to the island they had received its lonely designation in return.’
- ‘By the time to woman is born the intertwined history of her family and the island was already advanced.’

Q. **What does this suggest about choice and obligation?**

**Love/Sex**

- Energetic rams spend monastic frustrated months in all male company before returning to the mainland and the ‘full fury of the breeding season.’
Arrival of the red-haired boy. His hair seemed to ‘flash and reflect in the April sun like to sudden and different energy of spring.’

He is different. ‘She had never heard anyone say anything quite like that before.’

‘His cap was pushed back on his head and the evening sun caught the golden highlights of his burnished hair.

...she could not remember when he asked her to marry him but only that she had burst into tears and said ‘oh yes’ and they joined their hands on the flatness of table rock...’

He planned to return the next spring and they would go ‘to live somewhere else.’

‘Oh’ she said, dogging her fingers into the dampness of his neck, ‘when we are married we can do this all the time.’

Q. How does Alistair MacLeod show the strong connection between Agnes and the red-haired boy?

Death/Ghosts

‘The young man who fished with him last year was killed in the woods in the winter.’

Her knitting needle pierces her thumb making it bleed.

‘She could not believe the magnitude and suddenness of change.’

‘The blood was beginning to darken and dry upon her palm and between her fingers.’

She discovers she is ‘expecting a child.’

She tries to recall their meeting in the dark – she remembers the lightness of his body but it was ‘a memory of feeling rather than of sight.’

‘She had no photograph to emphasize reality. It was as if in vanishing from her future he had also vanished from her past.’

‘It was almost as if he had been a ghost.’

When she is silent about the identity of the father of her child there are rumours claiming it is her own father. She strongly denies this to the clergyman and he puts a stop to the rumours.

Q. How do we know that Agnes is affected by the terrible news of her lover’s death?

Her brother

A single man who ‘drank quite heavily and was given to moods of deep depression.’

He was uneasy about living on the island on his own but his father says he will ‘get used to it.’

‘But it seemed he did not get used to it.’

‘He had vanished like his tracks beneath the winter snow.’

Q. What does the strange disappearance of Agnes’s brother suggest about life on the island?
Returning to the island

- She was often to think of why she went back, although at the time seemed little conscious of the decision.’
- ‘She, herself, as the child of their advance years, seemed suddenly willing to consider herself old also and to identify with the past now her future seemed to point in that direction.’
- ‘She went back with an almost bitter gladness.’

Q. Why does Agnes return to the island and leave her daughter behind?

Aging parents

- ‘Although her father’s will was strong his aging body seemed to contribute to a pattern of betrayal.’
- Her elderly father goes to the mainland ‘She suddenly know in that instant that she would never see him again. She wanted to thank him or perhaps confess now that their time was vanishing between them. The secret of her own loneliness came down upon her ...’ She tells his it was ‘the red-haired man.’
- Her father dies and her mother ‘ten days after her husband.’
- Because of the spring break up she cannot attend either of their funerals and watches them from the island.
- ‘She turned her face into the wind and climbed up toward the light.’

Q. There is no emotional reaction from Agnes as she watches her parents’ funeral procession. Why, do you think?

Tradition

- She decides to stay on the island - her relatives approved because they wanted ‘some MacPhedran’ to remain on the island and cited that the fact she ‘was used to it.’

The fishermen

- Frenzied mackerel – ‘deep into the spawning season.’
- ‘the scent of their own blood spreading within the water spurred them to an even greater frenzy...’
- ‘The fish filled to bottom of the boat and began to rise in a blue-green flopping mass...’
- All afternoon they lay on table rock. ‘The clothes of the men were sprinkled with blackening clots of blood and golden spawn of female fish and the milky white semen of the male.’
- ‘After the first frenzy they were quieter, lying stretched beneath the sun.’
- ‘She began to walk up toward the lighthouse. She touched her body. It was sticky with blood and fishspawn and human seed.’

Q. Why had MacLeod included this event in the story?
Change

- ‘She realised she was becoming more careless of her appearance and such
carelessness was regarded as further evidence of eccentricity.’
- ‘She found her teenage daughter to be foreign and aloof and embarrassed by
her presence.’
- Government builds a new wharf on the mainland and fisherman stop coming
to stay on the island.
- The wharf on the island begins to deteriorate and the visitors come less
often.
- When she seeks help from her relatives she is dealing with a new generation
who are ‘sulky’ and reluctant to maintain the island tradition.
- Mainland operators offer trips around the island for tourists.
- ‘Standing at the edge of the sea in her dishevelled men’s clothing and
surrounded by snarling dogs… she had passed into folklore. She had become
‘the mad woman of the island.’
- Decision to close the lighthouse/would be maintained by modern
technology/ she would have to ‘live somewhere else.’
- She marvels that the places would remain but their ‘names would vanish ‘as
she walks around the island repeating all the place names.
- ‘She felt like whispering their names to them so they would never forget.’
- She approached spring with a longing born of confused emotions. She who
wanted to leave and wanted to return and wanted to stay felt the
approaching ache of those who leave the familiar behind.’

Q. List the key changes on the mainland and on the island? What are Agnes’s
reactions to these changes?

Ghosts

- A man arrives with red hair who mimics earlier words of her lover. ‘it must be
lonely … but I guess some people are lonely no matter what.’
- ‘She looked at him as if he were a ghost.’
- He claims to be her grandson and tells her he will return and take her to ‘live
somewhere else.’
- One wet night she walks down to the shanties and sees the ‘dripping ‘form
‘of the red-haired boy by the corner of the shanties.
- He says ‘It is time we went to live somewhere else.’
- When the light revolved ‘its solitary beam found no MacPhedrans on the
island or the sea.’

Q. Why is it significant that Agnes’s lover revisits her at the end of the story?

Task

Write a paragraph explaining the significance of the title of this story.
Repeated motifs/symbols/images

- Dish towel
- Ice/snow
- Rain
- Rams
- Dogs
- Table rock
- The island

Themes

- Truth
- Memory and imagination
- Tradition and change
- Resilience
- Family
- Identity
- Death
- Loss
- Isolation
- Hope
- Choice and obligation
Verbs for Analysis

What is the writer trying to do?

Use these specific verbs instead of argues, contends, shows and demonstrates.

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Questions to consider as you read:

• How is meaning created in the opening of the story?
• How is tension created through the writing?
• What can we understand about the narrator from the opening?
• What deliberate language choices has MacLeod made in these sentences?
• What can we understand about setting, symbolism, landscape?
• Authorial aim and context?
MacLeod: On Writing

“When I’m actually writing, I write a single sentence at a time, and then I read it aloud…Like any writer of fiction, I need to give information, but I try to relay it in a creative and sound-conscious way. Prose needs to aspire to something more than declarative sentences. I hesitate to say that it should express itself in a beautiful manner because that might seem pompous, but that’s the general idea.” (MacLeod, 2005)

1. How can you tell that MacLeod crafts each sentence in turn, before moving onto the next one?
2. Does his writing seem, indeed, “pompous”?
3. Is he writing fiction or memoir (what – if any – are the differences between these)?
4. How can his style be classified as both realism and myth?

Fiction as art; art as illusion

“But the seal was dead, yet facing us in a frozen perfection that was difficult to believe…Even now in memory it seems more real than reality – as if it were transformed by frozen art into something more arresting than life itself. The way the sudden seal in the museum exhibit freezes your eyes with the touch of truth.” (Winter Dog)

1. Does MacLeod merely provide a literary description of reality that appears as realism? Is what he writes, therefore, real? Does it matter?
2. What purpose does the art of fiction serve? How do you think this relates to MacLeod’s intent in writing these short stories?
3. What can we stand to gain/value as readers of fiction?
Narrative Style

“…this has been the telling of a story about a story, but like most stories it has spun off into others and relied on others and perhaps no story really stands alone” (Vision)

“…the translation of personal experience into motifs which have a collective significance” (Lowry, 2001, on MacLeod’s stories)

1. What is a ballad?
2. How can you use the quotations above to argue that MacLeod’s stories have a ballad-like quality?

 Orientations and resolutions

“It is an evening during the summer that I am ten years old...” (The Return)

“I am speaking now of a July in the early 1970s and it is in the morning...” (The Road of Rankin’s Point)

“I am speaking here of a time when I was eleven and lived with my family...” (To Everything There is a Season)

“It was the summer after the seventh grade that saw me truly smitten...” (Second Spring)

1. How do the openings of MacLeod’s stories (those above, and others) signal that the reader is about to listen to a yarn?
2. How do the endings leave the reader/listening thinking/feeling? What is MacLeod’s purpose?

Tone of Island

“The Gaelic songs will be sung for only one generation more – to an audience of anthropologists and folklorists with their recording machines, in performances that are less preservation than cultural taxidermy” (Sutherland, 2001, on The Tuning of Perfection)

1. Demonstrate why MacLeod’s stories have been described as: elegiac, graven, resigned, melancholy, hopeful.
2. Do MacLeod’s characters living in the modern world experience “gentler deaths” but emptier lives?
3. How does MacLeod explore the “pathos of social progress” in his stories? What does pathos simultaneously embody?

Speaking: The narrator

“I think that a lot of people talk and a lot of people don’t talk. And sometimes, occupations dictate whether you can talk or not. Men in fishing boats never talk all day because they can’t hear one another. The waves are shroshing over, they just work and they never speak or they make signs because they can’t hear one another above the wind and the waves. But their brothers who work in the fish plants stand all day cutting the fish, and they talk all the time!...So that’s the thing about the dialogue, a lot of people in the stories don’t speak very much.” (MacLeod, 2008)

“I think first person can be used very effectively as a story-telling device. I think readers can get quite involved in a story...It sounds like I’m going to tell you what really happened to me, and the reader will sense that the story has great meaning to the narrator.” (MacLeod, 2005)
1. What does the first-person, present tense discursive narrative foreground? How does it create intensity?
2. What is underscored by a) using a male narrator b) the gaps and silences in the stories?
3. How does the prison of language mirror the imprisonment of the characters? (NB. English? Gaelic?)

Description: The precise Memorial

MacLeod’s descriptive layering and heaping of detail upon detail has been described as creating a “precise memorial” (Sutherland, 2001) and leading to “authenticity in detail”. In this he has been compared to a hospitalised George Orwell who listed everything in his room in order to take “comfort in inventory.”

1. Why is description and detail important in creating a portrait? Who/what is MacLeod creating a portrait of? Who/what is he memorialising?
2. What effect does MacLeod’s style of building with “and”s create?
3. What is the effect of using personification to describe the landscape? How does it impact on the way the reader perceives/interacts with the landscape?

Literary Allusions

“The collection as a whole abounds in literary allusions and this adventitious knowingness gives an edge of MacLeod’s handling of family life and mutual incomprehension on the part of his characters.” (Lowry, 2001)

1. Why are there so many allusions to other texts/writers/bookish pursuits in these stories? What comment might MacLeod be making about literature?
2. How does this “give an edge” to the themes MacLeod is exploring?

Isle of Skye, Scotland (Highlands) – August 2016
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<tr>
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