

# Death, loss, and their repercussions in the stories of alistair macleod

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



"...the tears froze to their reddened cheeks."

Indeed, Calum's mental interpretation of his father's grief as a child unveils the poignant sorrow often associated with loss in MacLeod's text. Inspired by a historical context of decaying Cape Breton traditions, Alistair MacLeod's elegiac anthology of short stories *Island* provides readers with a perception of the heartbreak that is an impact of death and the passing of traditions. MacLeod's oeuvre encourages readers to consider the bitterness of the fragmentation of families and loss of traditional lifestyles. The ramifications of loss, moreover, extend to a belated appreciation of sacrifice for MacLeod's Cape Breton peoples. MacLeod also facilitates an understanding of the overwhelming bereavement that is an impact of death.

MacLeod delineates to readers the bitter resentment that is a corollary of the loss of traditions. In "The Boat", MacLeod orchestrates antithesis of the mother "looking upon the sea with love and [her son] with bitterness" to highlight the antipathy that is a repercussion of a loss of family unity. Indeed, the narrator's reflection of how his mother "of all the Lynns has neither son nor son-in-law who will go to the boat" seeks to evoke in readers memories of isolated family and friends, or even constitutes a poignant reminder of their own isolation. Such notions are echoed in MacLeod's use of biting language in the grandmother's dialogue in "The Return," where she berates Angus and his brother as "lost to us the both of you...more lost than Andrew...who is buried under the sea." MacLeod interweaves this language with the grandfather's criticism of "being owned by [Angus'] woman's family" to provide readers with an understanding of the older generation's

bitterness towards a younger generation that espouses individualism.

MacLeod's narratives therefore facilitate insight into the acrimony associated with dispersal and individualism.

Additionally, MacLeod unveils the belated, irremediable guilt for those who are forever lost performing the ultimate self-sacrifice of death. Through the anaphora of "it is not an easy thing to know...nor is it easy to know that your father was found..." in "The Boat", MacLeod underscores the guilt felt by those who benefit from the unfortunate deaths of others. (See note 1) Just as his narrator ruminates on such past sacrifice when "teaching at a great midwestern university," MacLeod leads readers who have left family and home to ponder upon and begin to grasp the sacrifices that enabled them to do so. Such a purpose is reflected in "The Tuning of Perfection," where MacLeod presents Archibald's "numbness" at the death of his brother, who "fought the drifts" to "bear him the news every one else on the mountain already knew." The symbol of Archibald's numbness represents the debilitating mixture of grief, love and guilt that overcomes those attempting to fathom deaths. MacLeod consequently guides readers to a comprehension of the guilt associated with life lost out of self-sacrifice.

MacLeod's narratives also reveal the bereavement intertwined in death and coming-of-age, the bereavement immanent in universal human narratives of lifelong change. MacLeod's use of metaphor in "To Every Thing There Is a Season," where his narrator is "jabbed by his own small wound" at "being on the adult side of the world," delineates the acute personal bereavement of a loss of innocence. MacLeod hence prompts readers to attempt to

comprehend, and reflect upon, the pain they felt at times of final separation from the people or lifestyles they cherish. Moreover, the poignant language of how Archibald “thought he might cry” as he thought of his “pale unbreathing son” is employed by MacLeod to create an understanding of the overwhelming sorrow of loss. Furthermore, in “The Closing Down of Summer”, MacLeod endows narratives of death with an almost saga-like quality, as the grief of the “midnight phone call” modulates and fades “like the ballads...of the distant lonely past” into something “more bitter or more serene”. In this way, MacLeod’s narratives encourage readers to develop a perception of the complex bereavement that is an impact of death.

Ultimately, MacLeod’s polyphonic oeuvre traverses the bitterness and grief that are repercussions of the loss of lifestyle and death. Readers are hence left with an indelible and confronting understanding of the inevitability of sorrow in death. Indeed, in the words of the grandfather in “The Vastness of the Dark,” memories of loss are recollections that “will wake you up at night and never leave you alone”