

# [The burdening effect of remorse: atwood’s and macleod’s fiction](https://assignbuster.com/the-burdening-effect-of-remorse-atwoods-and-macleods-fiction/)

As Charlotte Bronte once wrote, “ Remorse is the poison of life.” It is true that regret and remorse are inevitable in living a full life, but it also remains true that remorse can indeed be poisoning–so poisoning, in fact, that it can stop one from leading the life that one was intended to lead. In the short stories “ Death by Landscape” by Margaret Atwood and “ The Closing Down of Summer” by Alistair MacLeod, both of the main characters experience repentance in regards to their own lives, particularly when thinking about death. When Atwood’s Lois thinks about Lucy’s death, and the unnamed narrator of “ The Closing Down of Summer” anticipates his inevitable death, one can see how remorse plays a significant role in limiting these characters from being truly happy. Lois is constantly haunted by her past and perpetually keeps her past alive through landscape paintings, never fully accepting what has happened nor moving on from the death of her childhood friend Lucy. Likewise, the narrator in “ The Closing Down of Summer” lives a solitary life as a miner, and he implies throughout the story and through Gaelic songs that he regrets the words left unsaid and the lapses in his presence around his family. Through these two short stories, one sees how remorse can be so burdening that it can keep an individual from moving forward with life.

Lois and the unnamed narrator in “ Closing Down of Summer” both experience something similar that instils remorse within both characters: death. In “ Death by Landscape,” Lois is best friends with a girl named Lucy who mysteriously disappears in the forest. The cause of her death remains unknown, but it seems that perhaps Lucy may have committed suicide because she seemed to be unhappy with her life. Lucy became more “ slower, more languorous. She is no longer interested in sneaking around after dark…. She is pensive, and hard to wake in the mornings” (Atwood 274). When Lucy then says that she has to pee, she goes by a cliff and Lois leaves Lucy alone to do her business. Lucy screams, and when Lois attempts to look for Lucy, she is somehow gone. Then, when Lois returns and tells Cappie that Lucy has disappeared, Cappie accuses Lois of pushing Lois off the cliff. This incident marks when Lois begins to feel guilt for what has happened. Although she claims herself to be innocent, she is still haunted by other people’s accusations. In page 283, the narration explains, “ This is what stayed with her: the knowledge that she had been singled out, condemned for something that was not her fault” (Atwood 283).

With that in mind, one can see that Lois’s guilt begins to affect her life beyond her public image. Her existence is then restricted, haunted by Lucy’s death, and the memory never really fades away. Her family life is also halted by her survivor’s guilt. Again, it is left a mystery whether or not Lois did push Lucy off the cliff. In page 283, her guilt affects the way she thinks of her family and how she interacts with her family: “ She can hardly remember, now, having her two boys in the hospital, nursing them as babies; she can hardly remember getting married, or what Rob looked like. Even at the time she never felt she was paying full attention. She was tired a lot, as if she was living not one life but two: her own, and another shadowy life that hovered around her and would not let itself be realized – the life of what would have happened if Lucy had not disappeared from time” (Atwood 283). Her guilt seems to impede her from living a life in which she is fully present. Rather, she is leading “ two lives,” one of which she is simply a hovering shadow. This sentiment indicates that she is not really living, but rather existing; not really feeling, but simply doing. In this statement, she suggests that she does not remember nursing her boys as babies, even though such an action is supposed to be one of the defining moments of a mother’s life, and she could not remember what her husband looked like nor her wedding. She is stating that she does not remember the most prominent moments or events in her life; something seems to be stopping her from being truly happy – and that something seems to be Lucy’s death. Lucy’s death had kept her from “ paying full attention” to her life. The guilt of her death seems so burdening that her family life is almost ruined. Her not being “ fully present” also implies that she probably was not playing the vital role of a mother to her children and family. Ultimately, the remorse that is a consequence of Lucy’s death has led Lois to become distant from her family and has kept her at a standstill in her life.

Likewise, in “ The Closing Down of Summer,” the narrator experiences deep regret for what has happened in his own life. The narrator chooses a solitary life of mining that keeps him away from his family, something that causes him to regret the things that he has done. In this short story, the narrator attempts to “ tell the nature of [his] work and perhaps some of [his] entombed feelings to those that [he] would love.” As opposed to “ Death by Landscape,” it is by anticipating his inevitable death that he begins to regret his family relations. While thinking about death, he realizes things about life that call forth feelings of remorse. By calling attention to his detachment from his family, he implies that he could have said more or done more for his wife and children. He says, “ It is difficult to explain to my wife such things, and we have grown more and more apart with the passage of the years. Meeting infrequently as shy strangers, communicating mostly over vast distances through ineffectual say-nothing letters or cheques that substitute money for what was once conceived as love” (MacLeod 244). Through the way in which the unnamed narrator speaks of his family, it is obvious that there is a hint of remorse and guilt for him choosing the life of mining over being there for his relatives. His lack of communication with them leaves him feeling tongue-tied, as he finds it “ difficult to explain” these things to his wife.

Furthermore, he recalls that he was not there for his children, as when two of his children died, and to some extent overlooked the accomplishments of his other five children. In regards to his wife, he mentions that “ there are times when, even now, [he] can almost physically feel the summer of [their] marriage and of [their] honeymoon and of her singing” (MacLeod 245). One can sense the regret he harbors for being unable to communicate. He seems to be longing for a time when he was there with his wife, since the memory of their marriage and honeymoon remains clear in his memory – so clear, that he can “ physically feel it, even now.” This short story is ultimately about a man who longs to communicate what has been unsaid to the ones he loves; through his poignant narration, anyone can see that he regrets the lack of communication that he has with his family.

When the narrator leaves for Africa for a mining expenditure, he states, “ We have said farewells to our children, too, and to our wives, and I have offered kisses and looked into their eyes and wept outwardly and inwardly for all I have not said or done and for my own clumsy failure at communication. I have not been able, as the young say, to ‘ tell it like it is,’ and perhaps now I never shall” (MacLeod 253). By realizing his impending death, he realizes his remorse for not being there for his children and wife. As the quote indicates, he not only weeps outwardly but also inwardly for all the things he did not say or do. This sentiment shows how much he truly regrets not being there, and as he looks back on his life, he realizes how truly isolating it is to lead a life of mining. Both Atwood’s and MacLeod’s characters are stuck in a place full of regret and from which they cannot move forward in life. This miner seems to know that he is stuck in this life of mining, and has even come to terms with it and the regret that comes with it, because he has also comes to terms with death.

In both short stories, one can also see how the main characters’ regret and remorse are perpetuated throughout their entire lives, showing how they never truly get over the guilt they feel for what has happened. Lois has her landscape paintings in her home which seems to perpetuate the guilt and keep the memory of the guilt alive. It is obvious that her guilt keeps her from moving forward because these paintings simply remind her of Lucy. She clearly has not moved on from what has happened because she cannot seem to let go of these paintings. In page 284, the narration describes Lois: “ She looks at the paintings, she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy. She’s there, in behind the pink stone island…” Atwood also writes, “ Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She is in Lois’s apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall. She is here” (Atwood 284). Through these quotes, one can see how the remorse for what has happened still lives within her and around her, through landscape paintings and through her mind. The reason she has all these paintings, and the reason she refuses to go up north or anywhere with “ wild trees and wild lakes” is because she is forever haunted by the memory of Lucy and her guilt. Notice how Lois envisions nature as being wild: “ She would never go up north, or any place with wild lakes and wild trees and the calls of the loons” (Atwood 283). As a child, she loved nature; now, she sees it as a negative element of the world, the landscape being dangerous, untamed, and unruly. This is because her guilt has changed her entire perspective on life; she no longer wishes to be around nature, and her life is simply a reflection of the guilt she feels for Lucy’s death. Again, this guilt is perpetuated by the use of landscape paintings in which she sees Lucy.

The unnamed character in “ Closing Down of Summer” uses Gaelic songs instead to perpetuate his guilt and keep memories alive. He always seems to listen to Gaelic songs because he says that such music “ speak[s] to us in the privately familiar.” As articulated in the Gaelic songs, he longs and wishes that he is able to communicate with his loved ones. Again, it is because he has not said enough to his family that he feels remorse; he might never have another chance to say what he wants to his family again. He says, “ I would have liked to reach beyond the tape recorders and the faces of the uninvolved to something that might prove to be more substantial and enduring” (MacLeod 247). In this quote, one can see how he wishes to communicate something to other people, something more meaningful through singing the Gaelic songs. In this story, the narrator wishes to be remembered for something; he wishes to be a legacy to his family and children, like the old Gaelic songs. He wants to be remembered for something long after his passing. It is through the Gaelic songs that he realizes that he lacks the ability for meaningful communication. Rather, he feels that his communication with his family is shallow and weak, as he states, “ We are only singing to ourselves” (MacLeod 247). Because he is unable to communicate with his Gaelic songs, he comes to regret the breakdown of communication between his family and himself.

Alas, one can see how remorse tends to be a burdening factor that can, indeed, halt one from moving forward in life, perhaps even impeding one from leading a life that is clearly envisioned or desired. Lois seems to be stuck in haunted memory of Lucy, regretting the fact that she survived instead of Lucy. Meanwhile, the narrator in “ Closing Down of Summer” seems to be coming to terms with the regret of the lack of communication with his family. Both are at a standstill in their lives because of these regrets. It is through these two short stories that one can see how a great deal of remorse can certainly impede one from moving forward.

## Works Cited

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